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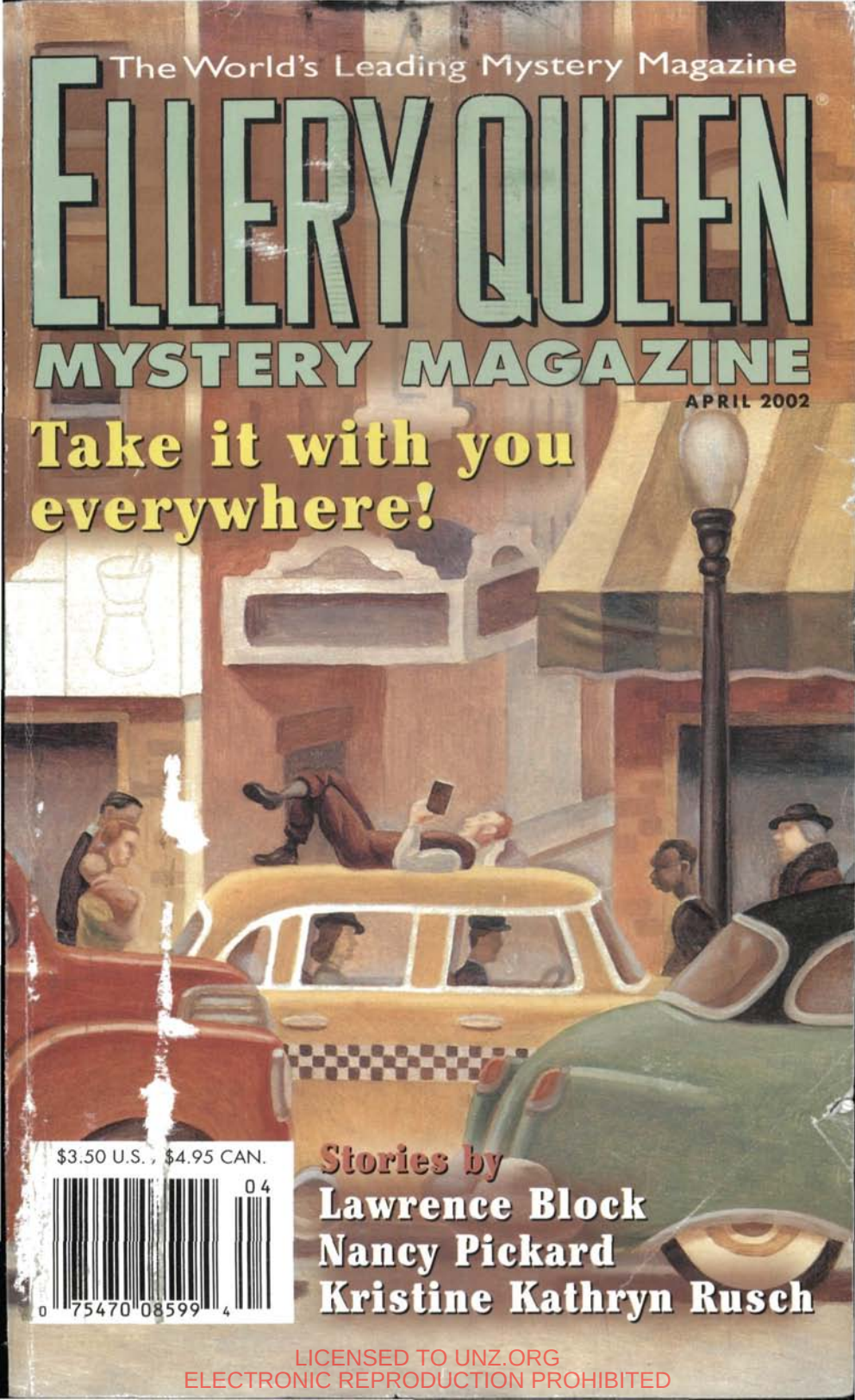

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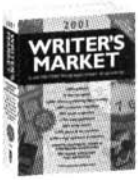

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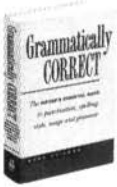

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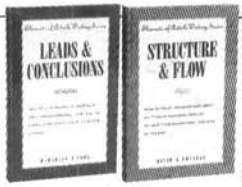

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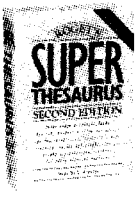

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CONTENTS

The perfect victim?
Page 32

Running for it
Page 76

Cover Illustration by
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Note: indicia on
page 143

FICTION

A Moment of Wrong Thinking
BY LAWRENCE BLOCK 4

Big City BY BILL JAMES 17

The Path to the Shroud
BY ROBERT BARNARD 24

Old Eyes BY NANCY PICKARD 32

Wasted Youth
BY SCOTT MACKAY 44

Gunfighter's Honeymoon
BY EDWARD D. HOCH 60

The Last Romantic
BY RAYMOND STEIBER 76

The Bat House
BY RAY NAYLER 93

Lifeline BY PETER USHER 98

Heroics
BY KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH 108

Nor Any Thing That Is His
BY DAVID WILLIAMS 128

REVIEWS

The Jury Box BY JON L. BREEN 57

POETRY

Crime of Fashion
BY DEBORAH M. LEE 23

Shirley, I Been Thinkin'
BY BROEK WOLFTEN 43

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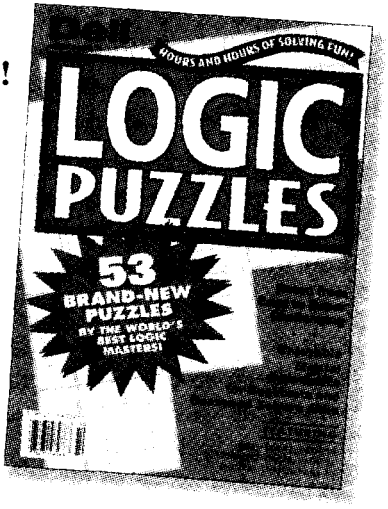

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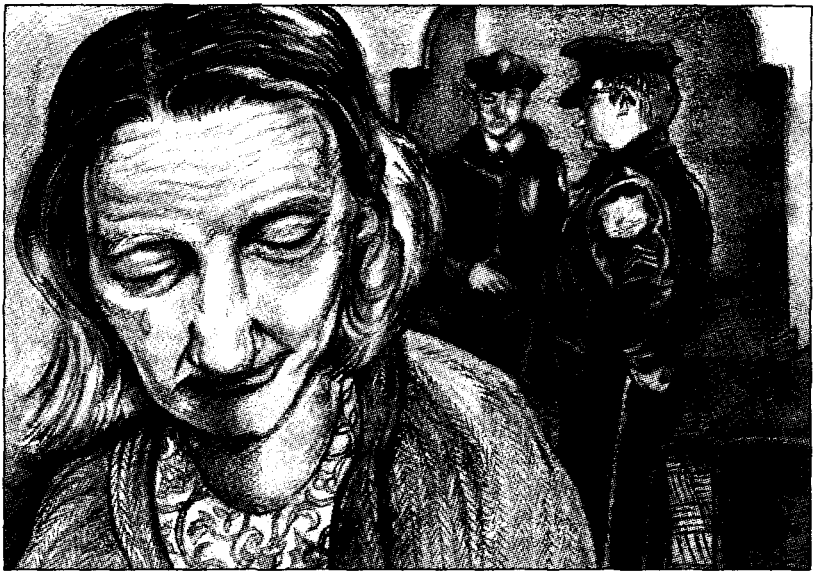

Art by June Levine

A Moment of Wrong Thinking

by Lawrence Block

Monica said, "What kind of a gun? A man shoots himself in his living room, surrounded by his nearest and dearest, and you want to know what kind of a gun he used?"

"I just wondered," I said.

Monica rolled her eyes. She's one of Elaine's oldest friends. They were in high school together, in Rego Park, and they never lost touch over the years. Elaine spent a lot of years as a call girl, and Monica, who was never in the life herself, seemed to have no difficulty accepting that. Elaine, for her part, had no judgment on Monica's predilection for dating married men.

She was with the current one that evening. The four of us had gone to a revival of *Allegro,* the Rogers and Hammerstein show that hadn't been a big hit the first time around. From there we went to Paris Green for a late supper. We talked about the show

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and speculated on reasons for its limited success. The songs were good, we agreed, and I was old enough to remember hearing "A Fellow Needs a Girl" on the radio. Elaine said she had a Lisa Kirk LP, and one of the cuts was "The Gentleman Is a Dope." That number, she said, had stopped the show during its initial run, and launched Lisa Kirk.

Monica said she'd love to hear it sometime. Elaine said all she had to do was find the record and then find something to play it on. Monica said she still had a turntable for LPs.

Monica's guy didn't say anything, and I had the feeling he didn't know who Lisa Kirk was, or why he had to go through all this just to get laid. His name was Doug Halley—like the comet, he'd said—and he did something in Wall Street. Whatever it was, he did well enough at it to keep his second wife and their kids in a house in Pound Ridge, in Westchester County, while he was putting the kids from his first marriage through college. He had a boy at Bowdoin, we'd learned, and a girl who'd just started at Colgate.

With his latest novel, *Hope to Die*, on the *NY Times* Bestseller List last November, Lawrence Block's popularity not only with mystery fans but with the general reader is evident. The book is the latest in what many critics consider to be his best series, featuring former cop Matt Scudder. (See The Jury Box, p. 57, for a review of the book!) Scudder is also the hero of this new short story, in which he reflects on an early police case. ✝

We got as much conversational mileage as we could out of Lisa Kirk, and the drinks came—Perrier for me, cranberry juice for Elaine and Monica, and a Stolichnaya martini for Halley. He'd hesitated for a beat before ordering it—Monica would surely have told him I was a sober alcoholic, and even if she hadn't, he'd have noted that he was the only one drinking—and I could almost hear him think it through and decide the hell with it. I was just as glad he'd ordered the drink. He looked as though he needed it, and when it came he drank deep.

It was about then that Monica mentioned the fellow who'd shot himself. It had happened the night before, too late to make the morning papers, and Monica had seen the coverage that afternoon on New York One. A man in Inwood, in the course of a social evening at his own home, with friends and family members present, had drawn a gun, ranted about his financial situation and everything that was wrong with the world, and then stuck the gun in his mouth and blew his brains out.

"What kind of a gun," Monica said again. "It's a guy thing, isn't

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it? There's not a woman in the world who would ask that question."

"A woman would ask what he was wearing," Halley said.

"No," Elaine said. "Who cares what he was wearing? A woman would ask what his wife was wearing."

"A look of horror would be my guess," Monica said. "Can you imagine? You're having a nice evening with friends and your husband shoots himself in front of everybody?"

"They didn't show it, did they?"

"They didn't interview her on camera, but they did talk with some man who was there and saw the whole thing."

Halley said that it would have been a bigger story if they'd had the wife on camera, and we started talking about the media and how intrusive they'd become. And we stayed with that until they brought us our food.

When we got home, Elaine said, "The man who shot himself. When you asked if they showed it, you didn't mean an interview with the wife. You wanted to know if they showed him doing it."

"These days," I said, "somebody's almost always got a camcorder running. But I didn't really think anybody had the act on tape."

"Because it would have been a bigger story."

"That's right. The play a story gets depends on what they've got to show you. It would have been a little bigger than it was if they'd managed to interview the wife, but it would have been everybody's lead story all day long if they could have actually shown him doing it."

"Still, you asked."

"Idly," I said. "Making conversation."

"Yeah, right. And you want to know what kind of gun he used. Just being a guy, and talking guy talk. Because you liked Doug so much, and wanted to bond with him."

"Oh, I was crazy about him. Where does she find them?"

"I don't know," she said, "but I think she's got radar. If there's a jerk out there, and if he's married, she homes in on him. What did you care what kind of gun it was?"

"What I was wondering," I said, "was whether it was a revolver or an automatic."

She thought about it. "And if they showed him doing it, you could look at the film and know what kind of a gun it was."

"Anybody could."

"I couldn't," she said. "Anyway, what difference does it make?"

"Probably none."

"Oh?"

"It reminded me of a case we had," I said. "Ages ago."

"Back when you were a cop, and I was a cop's girlfriend."

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I shook my head. "Only the first half. I was on the force, but you and I hadn't met yet. I was still wearing a uniform, and it would be awhile before I got my gold shield. And we hadn't moved to Long Island yet, we were still living in Brooklyn."

"You and Anita and the boys."

"Was Andy even born yet? No, he couldn't have been, because she was pregnant with him when we bought the house in Syosset. We probably had Mike by then, but what difference does it make? It wasn't about them. It was about the poor sonofabitch in Park Slope who shot himself."

"And did he use a revolver or an automatic?"

"An automatic. He was a World War Two vet, and this was the gun he'd brought home with him. It must have been a forty-five."

"And he stuck it in his mouth and—"

"Put it to his temple. Putting it in your mouth, I think it was cops who made that popular."

"Popular?"

"You know what I mean. The expression caught on, 'eating your gun,' and you started seeing more civilian suicides who took that route." I fell silent, remembering. "I was partnered with Vince Mahaffey. I've told you about him."

"He smoked those little cigars."

"Guinea-stinkers, he called them. DeNobilis was the brand name, and they were these nasty little things that looked as though they'd passed through the digestive system of a cat. I don't think they could have smelled any worse if they had. Vince smoked them all day long, and he ate like a pig and drank like a fish."

"The perfect role model."

"Vince was all right," I said. "I learned a hell of a lot from Vince."

"Are you gonna tell me the story?"

"You want to hear it?"

She got comfortable on the couch. "Sure," she said. "I like it when you tell me stories."

It was a weeknight, I remembered, and the moon was full. It seems to me it was in the spring, but I could be wrong about that part.

Mahaffey and I were in a radio car. I was driving when the call came in, and he rang in and said we'd take this one. It was in the Slope. I don't remember the address, but wherever it was, we weren't far from it, and I drove there and we went in.

Park Slope's a very desirable area now, but this was before the gentrification process got underway, and the Slope was still a working-class neighborhood, and predominantly Irish. The house we were directed to was one of a row of identical brownstone

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houses, four stories tall, two apartments to a floor. The vestibule was a half-flight up from street level, and a man was standing in the doorway, waiting for us.

"You want the Conways," he said. "Two flights up and on your left."

"You're a neighbor?"

"Downstairs of them," he said. "It was me called it in. My wife's with her now, the poor woman. He was a bastard, that husband of hers."

"You didn't get along?"

"Why would you say that? He was a good neighbor."

"Then how did he get to be a bastard?"

"To do what he did," the man said darkly. "You want to kill yourself, Jesus, it's an unforgivable sin, but it's a man's own business, isn't it?" He shook his head. "But do it in private, for God's sake. Not with your wife looking on. As long as the poor woman lives, that's her last memory of her husband."

We climbed the stairs. The building was in good repair, but drab, and the stairwell smelled of cabbage and of mice. The cooking smells in tenements have changed over the years, with the ethnic makeup of their occupants. Cabbage was what you used to smell in Irish neighborhoods. I suppose it's still much in evidence in Greenpoint and Brighton Beach, where new arrivals from Poland and Russia reside. And I'm sure the smells are very different in the stairwells of buildings housing immigrants from Asia and Africa and Latin America, but I suspect the mouse smell is there, too.

Halfway up the second flight of stairs, we met a woman on her way down. "Mary Frances!" she called upstairs. "It's the police!" She turned to us. "She's in the back," she said, "with her kids, the poor darlings. It's just at the top of the stairs, on your left. You can walk right in."

The door of the Conway apartment was ajar. Mahaffey knocked on it, then pushed it open when the knock went unanswered. We walked in and there he was, a middle-aged man in dark blue trousers and a white cotton tank-top undershirt. He'd nicked himself shaving that morning, but that was the least of his problems.

He was sprawled in an easy chair facing the television set. He'd fallen over on his left side, and there was a large hole in his right temple, the skin scorched around the entry wound. His right hand lay in his lap, the fingers still holding the gun he'd brought back from the war.

"Jesus," Mahaffey said.

There was a picture of Jesus on the wall over the fireplace, and, similarly framed, another of John F. Kennedy. Other photos and holy pictures reposed here and there in the room—on tabletops, on

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walls, on top of the television set. I was looking at a small framed photo of a smiling young man in an army uniform and just beginning to realize it was a younger version of the dead man when his wife came into the room.

"I'm sorry," she said, "I never heard you come in. I was with the children. They're in a state, as you can imagine."

"You're Mrs. Conway?"

"Mrs. James Conway." She glanced at her late husband, but her eyes didn't stay on him for long. "He was talking and laughing," she said. "He was making jokes. And then he shot himself. Why would he do such a thing?"

"Had he been drinking, Mrs. Conway?"

"He'd had a drink or two," she said. "He liked his drink. But he wasn't drunk."

"Where'd the bottle go?"

She put her hands together. She was a small woman, with a pinched face and pale blue eyes, and she wore a cotton housedress with a floral pattern. "I put it away," she said. "I shouldn't have done that, should I?"

"Did you move anything else, ma'am?"

"Only the bottle," she said. "The bottle and the glass. I didn't want people saying he was drunk when he did it, because how would that be for the children?" Her face clouded. "Or is it better thinking it was the drink that made him do it? I don't know which is worse. What do you men think?"

"I think we could all use a drink," he said. "Yourself not least of all, ma'am."

She crossed the room and got a bottle of Schenley's from a mahogany cabinet. She brought it, along with three small glasses of cut crystal. Mahaffey poured drinks for all three of us and held his to the light. She took a tentative sip of hers while Mahaffey and I drank ours down. It was an ordinary blended whiskey, an honest workingman's drink. Nothing fancy about it, but it did the job.

Mahaffey raised his glass again and looked at the bare-bulb ceiling fixture through it. "These are fine glasses," he said.

"Waterford," she said. "There were eight, they were my mother's, and these three are all that's left." She glanced at the dead man. "He had his from a jelly glass. We don't use the Waterford for everyday."

"Well, I'd call this a special occasion," Mahaffey said. "Drink that yourself, will you? It's good for you."

She braced herself, drank the whiskey down, shuddered slightly, then drew a deep breath. "Thank you," she said. "It *is* good for me, I'd have to say. No, no more for me. But have another for yourselves."

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I passed. Vince poured himself a short one. He went over her story with her, jotting down notes from time to time in his notebook. At one point she began to calculate how she'd manage without poor Jim. He'd been out of work lately, but he was in the building trades, and when he worked he made decent money. And there'd be something from the Veterans Administration, wouldn't there? And Social Security?

"I'm sure there'll be something," Vince told her. "And insurance? Did he have insurance?"

There was a policy, she said. Twenty-five thousand dollars, he'd taken it out when the first child was born, and she'd seen to it that the premium was paid each month. But he'd killed himself, and wouldn't that keep them from paying?

"That's what everybody thinks," he told her, "but it's rarely the case. There's generally a clause, no payment for suicide during the first six months, the first year, maybe even the first two years. To keep you from taking out the policy on Monday and doing away with yourself on Tuesday. But you've had this for more than two years, haven't you?"

She was nodding eagerly. "How old is Patrick? Almost nine, and it was taken out just around the time he was born."

"Then I'd say you're in the clear," he said. "And it's only fair, if you think about it. The company's been taking a man's premiums all these years, why should a moment of wrong thinking get them off the hook?"

"I had the same notion myself," she said, "but I thought there was no hope. I thought that was just the way it was."

"Well," he said, "it's not."

"What did you call it? A moment of wrong thinking? But isn't that all it takes to keep him out of heaven? It's the sin of despair, you know." She addressed this last to me, guessing that Mahaffey was more aware of the theology of it than I. "And is that fair?" she demanded, turning to Mahaffey again. "Better to cheat a widow out of the money than to cheat James Conway into hell."

"Maybe the Lord's able to take a longer view of things."

"That's not what the fathers say."

"If he wasn't in his right mind at the time . . ."

"His right mind!" She stepped back, pressed her hand to her breast. "Who in his right mind ever did such a thing?"

"Well . . ."

"He was joking," she said. "And he put the gun to his head, and even then I wasn't frightened, because he seemed his usual self and there was nothing frightening about it. Except I had the thought that the gun might go off by accident, and I said as much."

"What did he say to that?"

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"That we'd all be better off if it did, himself included. And I said not to say such a thing, that it was horrid and sinful, and he said it was only the truth, and then he looked at me, he *looked* at me."

"What kind of a look?"

"Like, *See what I'm doing?* Like, *Are you watching me, Mary Frances?* And then he shot himself."

"Maybe it was an accident," I suggested.

"I saw his face. I saw his finger tighten on the trigger. It was as if he did it to spite me. But he wasn't angry at me. For the love of God, why would he . . ."

Mahaffey clapped me on the shoulder. "Take Mrs. Conway into the other room," he said. "Let her freshen up her face and drink a glass of water, and make sure the kids are all right." I looked at him, and he gave my shoulder a squeeze. "Something I want to check," he said.

I went into the kitchen, where Mrs. Conway wet a dishtowel and dabbed tentatively at her face, then filled a jelly glass with water and drank it down in a series of small sips. Then we went to check on the children, a boy of eight and a girl a couple of years younger. They were just sitting there, hands folded in their laps, as if someone had told them not to move.

Mrs. Conway fussed over them and assured them everything was going to be fine and told them to get ready for bed. We left them as we found them, sitting side by side, their hands still folded in their laps. I suppose they were in shock, and it seemed to me they had the right.

I brought the woman back to the living room, where Mahaffey was bent over the body of her husband. He straightened up as we entered the room. "Mrs. Conway," he said, "I have something important to tell you."

She waited to hear what it was.

"Your husband didn't kill himself," he announced.

Her eyes widened, and she looked at Mahaffey as if he'd gone suddenly mad. "But I saw him do it," she said.

He frowned, nodded. "Forgive me," he said. "I misspoke. What I meant to say was that the poor man did not commit suicide. He did kill himself, of course he killed himself—"

"I saw him do it."

"—and of course you did, and what a terrible thing for you, what a cruel thing. But it was not his intention, ma'am. It was an accident!"

"An accident."

"Yes."

"To put a gun to your head and pull the trigger. An accident?"

Mahaffey had a handkerchief in his hand. He turned his hand

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palm-up to show what he was holding with it. It was the cartridge clip from the pistol.

"An accident," Mahaffey said. "You said he was joking, and that's what it was, a joke that went bad. Do you know what this is?"

"Something to do with the gun?"

"It's the clip, ma'am. Or the magazine, they call it that as well. It holds the cartridges."

"The bullets?"

"The bullets, yes. And do you know where I found it?"

"In the gun?"

"That's where I would have expected to find it," he said, "and that's where I looked for it, but it wasn't there. And then I patted his pants pockets, and there it was." And, still using the handkerchief to hold it, he tucked the cartridge clip into the man's right-hand pocket.

"You don't understand," he told the woman. "How about you, Matt? You see what happened?"

"I think so."

"He was playing a joke on you, ma'am. He took the clip out of the gun and put it in his pocket. Then he was going to hold the unloaded gun to his head and give you a scare. He'd give the trigger a squeeze, and there'd be that instant before the hammer clicked on an empty chamber, that instant where you'd think he'd really shot himself, and he'd get to see your reaction."

"But he did shoot himself," she said.

"Because the gun still had a round in the chamber. Once you've chambered a round, removing the clip won't unload the gun. He forgot about the round in the chamber, he thought he had an unloaded weapon in his hand, and when he squeezed the trigger, he didn't even have time to be surprised."

"Christ have mercy," she said.

"Amen to that," Mahaffey said. "It's a horrible thing, ma'am, but it's not suicide. Your husband never meant to kill himself. It's a tragedy, a terrible tragedy, but it was an accident." He drew a breath. "It might cost him a bit of time in purgatory, playing a joke like that, but he's spared hellfire, and that's something, isn't it? And now I'll want to use your phone, ma'am, and call this in."

"That's why you wanted to know if it was a revolver or an automatic," Elaine said. "One has a clip and one doesn't."

"An automatic has a clip. A revolver has a cylinder."

"If he'd had a revolver he could have played Russian roulette. That's when you spin the cylinder, isn't it?"

"So I understand."

"How does it work? All but one chamber is empty? Or all but one chamber has a bullet in it?"

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"I guess it depends what kind of odds you like."

She thought about it, shrugged. "Those poor people in Brooklyn," she said. "What made Mahaffey think of looking for the clip?"

"Something felt off about the whole thing," I said, "and he remembered a case of a man who'd shot a friend with what he was sure was an unloaded gun, because he'd removed the clip. That was the defense at trial, he told me, and it hadn't gotten the guy anywhere, but it stayed in Mahaffey's mind. And as soon as he took a close look at the gun he saw the clip was missing, so it was just a matter of finding it."

"In the dead man's pocket."

"Right."

"Thus saving James Conway from an eternity in hell," she said. "Except he'd be off the hook with or without Mahaffey, wouldn't he? I mean, wouldn't God know where to send him without having some cop hold up a cartridge clip?"

"Don't ask me, honey. I'm not even Catholic."

"Goyim is goyim," she said. "You're supposed to know these things. Never mind, I get the point. It may not make a difference to God or to Conway, but it makes a real difference to Mary Frances. She can bury her husband in holy ground and know he'll be waiting for her when she gets to heaven her own self."

"Right."

"It's a terrible story, isn't it? I mean, it's a good story as a story, but it's terrible, the idea of a man killing himself that way. And his wife and kids witnessing it, and having to live with it."

"Terrible," I agreed.

"But there's more to it. Isn't there?"

"More?"

"Come on," she said. "You left something out."

"You know me too well."

"Damn right I do."

"So what's the part I didn't get to?"

She thought about it. "Drinking a glass of water," she said.

"How's that?"

"He sent you both out of the room," she said, "*before* he looked to see if the clip was there or not. So it was just Mahaffey, finding the clip all by himself."

"She was beside herself, and he figured it would do her good to splash a little water on her face. And we hadn't heard a peep out of those kids, and it made sense to have her check on them."

"And she had to have you along so she didn't get lost on the way to the bedroom."

I nodded. "It's convenient," I allowed, "making the discovery with no one around. He had plenty of time to pick up the gun, remove the clip, put the gun back in Conway's hand, and slip the clip into

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the man's pocket. That way he could do his good deed for the day, turning a suicide into an accidental death. It might not fool God, but it would be more than enough to fool the parish priest. Conway's body could be buried in holy ground, regardless of his soul's ultimate destination."

"And you think that's what he did?"

"It's certainly possible. But suppose you're Mahaffey, and you check the gun and the clip's still in it, and you do what we just said. Would you stand there with the clip in your hand waiting to tell the widow and your partner what you learned?"

"Why not?" she said, and then answered her own question. "No, of course not," she said. "If I'm going to make a discovery like that I'm going to do so in the presence of witnesses. What I do, I get the clip, I take it out, I slip it in his pocket, I put the gun back in his hand, and then I wait for the two of you to come back. And *then* I get a bright idea, and we examine the gun and find the clip missing, and one of us finds it in his pocket, where I know it is because that's where I stashed it a minute ago."

"A lot more convincing than his word on what he found when no one was around to see him find it."

"On the other hand," she said, "wouldn't he do that either way? Say I look at the gun and see the clip's missing. Why don't I wait until you come back before I even look for the clip?"

"Your curiosity's too great."

"So I can't wait a minute? But even so, suppose I look and I find the clip in his pocket. Why take it out?"

"To make sure it's what you think it is."

"And why not put it back?"

"Maybe it never occurs to you that anybody would doubt your word," I suggested. "Or maybe, wherever Mahaffey found the clip, in the gun or in Conway's pocket where he said he found it, maybe he would have put it back if he'd had enough time. But we came back in, and there he was with the clip in his hand."

"In his handkerchief, you said. On account of fingerprints?"

"Sure. You don't want to disturb existing prints or leave prints of your own. Not that the lab would have spent any time on this one. They might nowadays, but back in the early sixties? A man shoots himself in front of witnesses?"

She was silent for a long moment. Then she said, "So what happened?"

"What happened?"

"Yeah, your best guess. What really happened?"

"No reason it couldn't have been just the way he reconstructed it. Accidental death. A dumb accident, but an accident all the same."

"But?"

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"But Vince had a soft heart," I said. "Houseful of holy pictures like that, he's got to figure it's important to the woman that her husband's got a shot at heaven. If he could fix that up, he wouldn't care a lot about the objective reality of it all."

"And he wouldn't mind tampering with evidence?"

"He wouldn't lose sleep over it. God knows I never did."

"Anybody you ever framed," she said, "was guilty."

"Of something," I agreed. "You want my best guess, it's that there's no way of telling. As soon as the gimmick occurred to Vince, that the clip might be missing, the whole scenario was set. Either Conway had removed the clip and we were going to find it, or he hadn't and we were going to remove it for him, and *then* find it."

" 'The Lady or the Tiger.' Except not really, because either way it comes out the same. It goes in the books as an accident, whether that's what it was or not."

"That's the idea."

"So it doesn't make any difference one way or the other."

"I suppose not," I said, "but I always hoped it was the way Mahaffey said it was."

"Because you wouldn't want to think ill of him? No, that's not it. You already said he was capable of tampering with evidence, and you wouldn't think ill of him for it, anyway. I give up. Why? Because you don't want Mr. Conway to be in hell?"

"I never met the man," I said, "and it would be presumptuous of me to care where he winds up. But I'd prefer it if the clip was in his pocket where Mahaffey said it was, because of what it would prove."

"That he hadn't meant to kill himself? I thought we just said . . ."

I shook my head. "That she didn't do it."

"Who? The wife?"

"Uh-huh."

"That she didn't do what? Kill him? You think *she* killed him?"

"It's possible."

"But he shot himself," she said. "In front of witnesses. Or did I miss something?"

"That's almost certainly what happened," I said, "but she was one of the witnesses, and the kids were the other witnesses, and who knows what they saw, or if they saw anything at all? Say he's on the couch, and they're all watching TV, and she takes his old war souvenir and puts one in his head, and she starts screaming, 'Ohmigod, look what your father has done! Oh, Jesus Mary and Joseph, Daddy has killed himself!' They were looking at the set, they didn't see dick, but they'll think they did by the time she stops carrying on."

"And they never said what they did or didn't see."

"They never said a word, because we didn't ask them anything. Look, I don't think she did it. The possibility didn't even occur to

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me until sometime later, and by then we'd closed the case, so what was the point? I never even mentioned the idea to Vince."

"And if you had?"

"He'd have said she wasn't the type for it, and he'd have been right. But you never know. If she didn't do it, he gave her peace of mind. If she did do it, she must have wondered how the cartridge clip migrated from the gun butt to her husband's pocket."

"She'd have realized Mahaffey put it there."

"Uh-huh. And she'd have had twenty-five thousand reasons to thank him for it."

"Huh?"

"The insurance," I said.

"But you said they'd have to pay anyway."

"Double indemnity," I said. "They'd have had to pay the face amount of the policy, but if it's an accident, they'd have had to pay double. That's if there was a double-indemnity clause in the policy, and I have no way of knowing whether or not there was. But most policies sold around then, especially relatively small policies, had the clause. The companies liked to write them that way, and the policyholders usually went for them. A fraction more in premiums and twice the payoff? Why not go for it?"

We kicked it around a little. Then she asked about the current case, the one that had started the whole thing. I'd wondered about the gun, I explained, purely out of curiosity. If it was in fact an automatic, and if the clip was in fact in his pocket and not in the gun where you'd expect to find it, surely some cop would have determined as much by now, and it would all come out in the wash.

"That's some story," she said. "And it happened when, thirty-five years ago? And you never mentioned it before?"

"I never thought of it," I said, "not as a story worth telling. Because it's unresolved. There's no way to know what really happened."

"That's all right," she said. "It's still a good story."

The guy in Inwood, it turned out, had used a .38-caliber revolver, and he'd cleaned it and loaded it earlier that same day. No chance it was an accident.

And if I'd never told the story over the years, that's not to say it hadn't come occasionally to mind. Vince Mahaffey and I never really talked about the incident, and I've sometimes wished we had. It would have been nice to know what really happened.

Assuming that's possible, and I'm not sure it is. He had, after all, sent me out of the room before doing whatever it was he did. That suggested he hadn't wanted me to know, so why should I think he'd be quick to tell me after the fact?

No way of knowing. And, as the years pass, I find I like it better that way. I couldn't tell you why, but I do. ●

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Big City

by Bill James

"The moral ambiguities displayed by James's characters and the tricky codes of conduct that they observe both delight and dismay, but they also ring true," said *Publishers Weekly* in reference to Bill James's latest novel from Norton, *Pay Days*. It would be hard to imagine trickier codes of conduct than those negotiated by the characters in Mr. James's new story for us, which takes an ironic look at attitudes in modern Wales. ✝

There was an agreement. Rhys and Jill had spelled it out together. They told each other it was for the sake of the children. Rhys told himself that, too. But he knew it was for his own sake. He must not lose Jill. To keep her he had accepted terms. They would be pals, living together with their family. For passion she would go elsewhere. It was painful, she said, but they must accept change. It could happen in a marriage. Look at most of their Cardiff friends! She suggested people were becoming more sexually independent, confident, and generally "big city," now the London government had given Wales *almost* a Parliament, *almost* independence. The Welsh Assembly, as this cut-price Parliament was called, had housed itself in a waterside building on Cardiff's dockhand. Jill said this transformed Wales, made it a *real* country again and brought the city the status of a true, world-scale capital at last. Small-town negativeness, small-town prudishness, narrow moralising, were no longer on. She considered the new attitudes were especially evident in folk from their circle—journalists, politicos, lobbyists: those most in tune with the reborn Wales. She said she still loved Rhys, but was not *in* love with him. She had met someone else.

Although Rhys was hurt, he rejected the difference between love and *in* love. Or, at least, he did not believe that side of it would last. He must wait it out. Nor did he see why political devolution from London should mean rampant adultery, but he let the point go. And so, the agreement. He considered it a workable pact and not necessarily humiliating. Later, looking back, he was sure

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nobody could have foreseen so much tragedy.

When the arrangement began, Jill used to offer fairly plausible tales beforehand to cover an absence, in case Rhys tried to ring her. She'd say shopping or a drink with Beth Postern. That stopped. It obviously sickened her to lie. She had a wonderful honesty: one of the things he loved her for. Now, she would announce only that she'd be out from midday. He did not ask where. Silence was part of the agreement. He noticed she never put on her smartest outfits for these meetings, nor wore jewellery he'd bought her. This meant she refused to rub his nose in it by festooning herself for someone else. He felt grateful. He could not tell her that, though.

In fact, it was when Rhys and Jill called the babysitter and went out as a couple to a restaurant or party that she dressed up and appeared at her most elegant. A room full of people shone if she was among them, shone *because* she was among them. As her husband, Rhys felt pride. Just as much as emotions and sex, her sparkle was the essence of Jill, and could never be withdrawn from him. This helped Rhys accept the agreement. She remained his: He owned that wondrous social side of Jill. He exulted to read the covetousness in men's faces.

Part of the agreement was that if he found somebody else, he should be free to go to her. Rhys felt sure he would never want that. This certainty enraged Jill, possibly increasing her sense of guilt. Too bad. He could not alter. Jill was the only woman for him. Once—only once—she tried to explain what had drawn her to the other man. Apparently, he relayed nonstop ferocious desire for Jill. This was the word she picked, *ferocious.* Rhys was embarrassed by it, not injured. He felt she sounded quaint. Yet she said this man's passion had left her no choice.

When the arrangement was new, he did not allow himself to think much about where the two of them went, and at that stage he would never have secretly tailed her. Although this was certainly not banned by the agreement, it would have seemed shady. He assumed they generally had an early lunch in a restaurant, and afterwards . . . Gross to speculate on that, and probably unhealthy. She liked to be home soon after the girls returned from school.

Rhys and Jill still visited restaurants themselves. Looking brilliant, she would talk and radiate at full power, and anyone watching would surely have supposed them alight with joy in each other, perhaps even lovers, not man and wife. It thrilled him. This was Jill as Rhys's, her jewellery very much in place. Occasionally, they bumped into acquaintances at these places and would perhaps make up a four or even push tables together for a party of six or eight. The more the better for Jill.

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On one of these evenings, they came across friends and colleagues at The Celtic Bistro, and, while helping rearrange the furniture, he felt the back of a hand, a woman's hand judging by size, pressed for a few seconds very firmly against the inside of his left, upper thigh. Very upper. At first, he thought it an accident amid the little confusions of apéritifed people reshaping the restaurant. Soon, though, he corrected: The contact was too prolonged. He yearned to believe it had been Jill. Was she telling him in a sudden, uncontrollable, almost shy fashion she was his after all; totally his, not just her public self? Perhaps her affair and therefore the idiotic agreement were dead. Time had righted things?

But, he must not dream. Really, he knew Jill was never near enough to touch him as they shifted the tables and chairs. He decided only Beth could have done it; Beth, strapping young wife of busy, inaugural Welsh Assembly member Jeremy Postern. No apology or joke came from her about the contact, though. That seemed to confirm the incident was intentional. Yet she did not attempt to sit next to him for the meal, and when he talked to her and studied her as the evening went on, he found no personal message, no readable explanation in her blue-black eyes for knuckles willfully nudging his nuts. The incident shook Rhys. It made him realise that the notion of "another woman" could be more than a notion. Perhaps someone else *was* available. To his amazement, this interested him. Was Jill correct, after all, to resent his self-righteous dismissal of the agreement's clause entitling him, also, to sexual liberty? Curiosity about the significance of the act dogged him. Perhaps it was part of the new sophistication: A woman would hint and wait.

Early one evening, when he was having a semi-work drink with Jeremy Postern, other Assembly members, and press friends in The Referendum cocktail bar, Rhys went outside briefly and mobiled Beth. She seemed warm, pleased to hear him, unsurprised. He wondered if they might meet one evening, and she thought they might. They fixed a time. Rhys went back to the bar feeling not excited or victorious but, yes, more *wholesome* than for ages, more manly.

Beth and he seemed to need no preliminaries. It was as if they had been waiting for each other. She went halves with him on a bottle of Dubonnet and the charge for a room overnight in the plush new Capital Hotel in Cardiff Bay, though they would be using it only for a few early evening hours. They made fierce, prolonged love. Yes, it was even *ferocious* prolonged love. Afterwards, while they lay relaxed, he reassured Beth about the care he would take with her reputation, explaining how he had phoned only when certain Jeremy was not at home.

"The smug sod wouldn't care," Beth replied. She sounded

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defeated. "He's too deep in all the superlative Assembly crap for love life. We go our own ways."

"You don't like that?"

Hurriedly, she turned towards him: "Darling, of course I do. I wouldn't be here with you now, otherwise, would I? Aren't you and Jill permissive with each other, too?"

"Good God, no. I couldn't tolerate the idea of her seeing somebody else, screwing somebody else."

"I adore jealousy in a man," she said vehemently. "It means he cares. It's what makes you so damn irresistible, Rhys. *You* wouldn't doze through a marriage. God, but Jill's lucky."

This encounter revolutionised Rhys, gave him vision. Jesus, might Jill think he did not care because he showed no rage and put up with the agreement? Was this why she had discarded him sexually? But he *did* care. He must show it. He was not like Jeremy—and like many men Rhys knew: by piffling career obsession and bed coolness they forced a wife to seek fulfillment elsewhere. He decided he must watch Jill discreetly when she went to one of her meetings. Although he still loathed the idea of gumshoeing, he had come to loathe apparent indifference even more. He would annihilate this disgusting, arid agreement. But agreements were only words and sentiments. He wanted something solid to smash. He needed a look at the opposition.

Luckily, he could take time off work as he wished. He was part of the newly hatched lobbying industry around Mount Stuart Square in Cardiff Bay at the docks, and ran his own hot public-relations firm. Surveillance was sure to be difficult, though. Jill would soon notice his Citroen. And so, next time she said she would be out for the afternoon, he took a company Vauxhall and went to wait near their Cowbridge, Vale of Glamorgan, house until she left at around noon.

She drove to a side street in Splott, an undazzling region of Cardiff. She parked. Rhys drove on a bit and also parked, then watched through the mirror. Soon, a Toyota arrived and drew in not far from Jill's VW. At once, Rhys sensed this was Lover Boy and turned in the driving seat now to get a proper look through the back window. He kept his face partially obscured by the headrest. A middle-height man left the Toyota and walked twenty yards to Jill, opened the VW passenger door, and climbed in. For a few minutes they kissed and talked, all excited smiles, arms locked around each other, as if they'd fought their way across ice floes after years of forced separation. Probably they were here every week.

Lover Boy's hair was grey, but cut in a bristly, young-thruster style. Boy? Palely aglow with the tired beams of Indian summer, he must be at least ten years older than Rhys. It hurt. She could

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prefer someone this age? He had a round, pushy face with heavy eyebrows. Although he could have had them trimmed, he must have felt they were part of his image, proving verve. Image was vital in this jumped-up metropolis. His face was full now of . . . Full of what Rhys longed to dismiss as raw, lucky-old-me triumph. This was someone in his fifties at least, all set for a nice afternoon with a beautiful woman of thirty-four. Horrified, though, Rhys found he could not honestly describe what he saw like that. His view was imperfect, but he glimpsed . . . well, damn it, yes, he glimpsed *love* there—maybe ferocious, maybe just intense, but in any case enough to terrify him. He sensed the power of their relationship, almost admired it, certainly envied him, the spry jerk. God, Beth had it so right and Rhys could switch on the jealousy. He was delighted at how well he hated. He might tell Beth about this whole unpleasant sequence.

The man's clothes were like some 1970s sports commentator's—three-quarter-length sheepskin coat and a crimson scarf. Still, he was presentable. Naturally. To think otherwise would be a rotten insult to Jill. And it would be mad to feel jealous if the rival were pathetic.

The lovers left the VW and began to walk. They turned into the main road. Rhys went after them on foot, staying well back. He saw Jill take the man's arm for a while, as though feeling anonymous in this unfashionable spot. But then she suddenly let go and put a little gap between them. She probably realised that, downmarket or not, people who knew her could be driving through. To be observed at all would be bad, but walking arm-in-arm was an utter giveaway. They kept the distance between them until vanishing into a rough-looking eatery. Never would Rhys have taken a woman to such a place, and certainly not a woman like Jill, even in run-of-the-mill clothes. At first, he thought Lover Boy must be short of money. But no, it was clearly part of the cleverness. This pair were unlikely to meet anyone they knew in such a dump, and especially not Jill. Secrecy above hygiene. After about ten minutes, Rhys walked past on the other side of the street and looked in. They were at a table near the window, too bloody tied up in themselves to notice anyone else.

He was sick with distance and rage and helplessness. The agreement came to seem contemptible. Bloodless. He returned to his car intending to wait until they appeared, then drive behind them to their next destination, presumably a room somewhere. But he found he could not face this. The old tenderness towards Jill, the old reluctance to snoop on her, ravaged him, made any further dogging impossible. Briefly, he contemplated vandalising the Toyota. In the Citroen boot he had a tyre lever which could have made an impression. But he was not driving the Citroen and, in any

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case, that was a crazy, infantile thought—vehicle-breaking by daylight in a well-peopled street. Instead, he walked to the Toyota and glanced inside. On top of the dashboard was an opened envelope showing a name and address. It seemed Lover Boy must be G. Lowther and lived in the Pontcanna district of the city. This comparatively chic spot was home to many loud people from independent television companies, presently coining it with innumerable worthy films about Welsh identity. Rhys thought this lad looked like a Geraint rather than a Glyn or a Gwyn. He couldn't have said why. Perhaps G. was on the technical side, or Rhys might have recognised him through work.

Rhys went back to the office and, as he sometimes did, stayed late. There were papers to deal with after his spell away. Some routines had to continue. But, obviously, his mind was badly troubled and he did not operate well. Would he ever operate well again if he stuck with the emptiness and degradation of the agreement? He finished, went out to the Citroen in the yard, and decided to drive home via Pontcanna. When he eventually reached Cowbridge, he was surprised to find Jill still up. She seemed desolated.

"Jeremy Postern rang," she said.

"Some sparkling speech he wants puffed? Am I to call him back? At this hour?"

"He rang *me,*" she said.

"Oh, yes?"

"Beth told him you and she have an affair going."

"Why the hell would she do that?"

"To make him jealous, I expect. Compel him to want her."

"But he couldn't care less, Jill."

"You fool. He's frantic at the thought of losing Beth. He asked me what we can do about it, he and I."

"Just like Jeremy."

"Maybe. Anyway, I won't tolerate this. Rhys, I'm leaving you. Tonight. Now. For keeps. I've sent the girls by taxi to my mother's."

"But, Jill, darling, why?" he cried. "It was only the agreement."

"The agreement is finished."

"It is?"

She wept. "It's not needed. Gaston and I ended things today. It all came to seem ludicrous, barren, mean. The relationship just dropped dead while we walked to a restaurant. We both sensed it, though neither of us understood why."

"Oh, a restaurant where?" Rhys asked.

"I intended a new start."

"But this is wonderful!"

"Not now. Impossible. It's unfair of me, maybe, but I can't stay since hearing of you and Beth. Unbearable. I'm going." Jill went out to her car. He walked urgently after her, and saw that the VW

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had suitcases on the rear seat. She climbed in, keyed the ignition, and music sounded from the radio. He stood by the side of the car, the driver's door open. She seemed to remember something and went hurriedly back into the house. She left the engine running, as if to tell him she had not changed her mind. He waited. The music ended and a local news bulletin began on the radio. It reported the discovery of a so-far-unidentified middle-aged man dead on the ground in a Pontcanna street. He had been killed by head wounds. Jill returned with another small case, which she placed in the back. She climbed into the VW again and reached out for the door, which still stood open. She said: "Rhys, how in God's name could you betray me with someone like Beth Postern?"

"But it was Beth who taught me the way to hold on to you, love." Jill pulled the door to and drove off. She did not wave. ●

Crime of Fashion
by Deborah M. Lee

Ralph St. Blackwell, top designer,
Had no time for lovers' trysts;
He was far too busy sketching
Or composing "Worst Dressed" lists—
Until he met a beauty
Of supermodel fame—
She was sinuous, and elegant,
And Satin was her name.
She was perfect! Ralph was smitten—
And soon became obsessed,
Not only by her Southern charm,
But she was so well-dressed!
But shortly after marrying
This vision of his dreams,
The relationship, so perfect once,
Unravelled at the seams.
She confessed her darkest secret—
Ralph could not believe his ears—
And outraged, he went at her
With his favorite pinking shears.

And now he sits in prison
Complaining to his jailer
About his shapeless overalls
And begging for a tailor.

You ask, what did she say to him
That made him so detest her?
"Mah modellin' name is Satin—
But mah real name's
Polly-Esther."

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The Path to the Shroud

by Robert Barnard

Violetta knew she had made a mistake almost as soon as she got into the shop. She had come in because she noticed a sign saying "English Books" in the window. English newspapers had been easy to obtain in Parma, books less so. Now she was inside the shop, she realised just from casting her eyes around the covers of books on display that she was in a religious bookshop. Not at all what she needed. She was in Italy for experiences, but not for religious ones, or not Christian ones. She dawdled around the pokey interior only to avoid the ungraciousness of walking straight out again.

"Robert Barnard's style might be described as classic whodunit with a slyly nasty twist—Roald Dahl out of Ngaio Marsh, so to speak," said a reviewer of the first of Mr. Barnard's Perry Trethowan novels. In the twenty years since the publication of that first Trethowan novel, the British author has been recognized, on both sides of the Atlantic, as a leader in the field, in part, no doubt, because of his distinctive style. †

The face hit her before she even found the section of English books. The sepia image of a bearded man, infinitely kind, unendingly forgiving: the picture of a man (Violetta thought) who grieved for the sufferings and forgave the transgressions of his fellow men—strong, loving, understanding. Who was he? She struggled with the title of the book: *Il Sudario di Torino.* She frowned.

Torino she knew. It was one of the places she had put among the possibilities on her itinerary: Turin. Then "sudario"—but of course! She didn't even need to scrabble in her bag for her pocket dictionary: This must be the face of the man on the Turin Shroud.

She looked again, concentrating on the face. The man seemed to look back, equally intent on her. Again she felt that the eyes of the

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man *saw,* saw *into,* understood. It was as if her whole life, her rackety, unstructured, uncertain journey through this and that enthusiasm or commitment, was in this man's brain as he gazed at her, and as if his insight gave the whole messy cycle a meaning and a purpose.

"Do you have this book in English?" Violetta asked the woman behind the counter. She shook her head slowly, but went over to the two or three shelves of English books to check. Then she shook her head more decidedly.

"Is not 'ere in Eenglish. In Torino maybe you find."

"I'm going to Turin," said Violetta, suddenly definite.

"Turin, yes. You find there per'aps. We 'ave phamplet in four languages. Maybe you like, so you read a little first?"

Violetta took the proffered "phamplet," and immediately decided to pay the four thousand lire demanded for it. The face was on the front page, and English was one of the four languages, along with French, Spanish, and German. She went out into the morning sunlight with a strange feeling of lightness, almost of happiness. She couldn't remember the last time she had felt almost happy.

She didn't look at the pamphlet when she got back to her hotel room. She saved it up. She showered, made herself up as if going to a party, then went back into town and made for the great square in front of the cathedral and baptistery. She walked purposefully across its cobbled expanse to the Angiol d'Oro nestling in the corner. She had been saving up one of the few remaining good restaurants of Parma, and tonight was certainly the night. She had no need of a book to console her loneliness. She watched the other customers, relished the food slowly, and dreamed of the bearded face that had somehow—miraculously?—been preserved on the shroud. She ended with the best Gorgonzola she had ever had in her life, relished the last of the wine, then headed back to her hotel.

The pamphlet was still nestling in the big, shabby old bag she always took with her on these exploratory holidays. She took it out, then sat on her bed feeling replete, contented, and above all full of anticipation.

She read the text of the pamphlet first. It was aimed at the faithful—and Violetta had never been that, in any sense. However, it did not shrink from the findings of modern research. Scientists were of the opinion (they did avoid the word "proved") that the shroud was in fact of thirteenth or fourteenth century provenance, just the period when mentions of this wonderful relic of Christ's death began to be recorded. The image of the man was not made by any conventional paint, stain, or other artist's material. Indeed, it seemed that science was unable to suggest what the image consisted of at all, other than with such (unscientific, surely?) images

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as "a burst of radiant energy." That conjecture tickled Violetta's interest almost as much as the face itself. She looked back at the cover.

Violetta was a great frequenter of art galleries—hence, Italy, hence the Italian cities slightly off the usual tourist trail. Her interest in art was amateur but intense. And she could swear that the image of the man on the shroud was like no image of a man in any thirteenth or fourteenth century painting. It was too realistic, not stylised enough. This was a man you could touch, imagine embracing. It was like an old sepia photograph of one's great-grandfather as a young or youngish man. Even if the image were of paint, Violetta could not have believed it was made in the thirteenth century.

As it was, it was not of paint, it was made by some substance or process unknown even to modern science, and it was an image startlingly modern in its realism.

Violetta got up and poured herself a whisky from the litre bottle she had had to trail around Parma to find. She had been devastated to discover at Heathrow that duty-free bottles were no longer available to travellers within Europe.

"Bugger the Common Market!" she had shouted at the girl behind the till. Still, she had at last found a supply in Parma, and would get more before moving on, just in case.

Walking around her hotel room, whisky-and-water in hand, Violetta decided that she was rather pleased the shroud was of medieval material. It removed the religious trappings, which roused no resonances in her own mind.

It left, though, the image of a medieval man, and the mystery of an image of him projected onto his shroud by no known means. That was exciting.

Violetta had always felt she had a gift for the paranormal, just as she had had a series of flirtations with alternative therapies and folk medicines. Karmas and Eastern thought systems and even simple hypnotism were things that fascinated her, and she had been "into" many of them with great thoroughness before passing on to the next enthusiasm. She had no problem with an image, whether of Christ or of some medieval man, projected after death onto the shroud in which his body was wrapped. She definitely preferred the idea of its being a man of the thirteenth or fourteenth century. Christ was a known factor: Both the worshipper and the sceptic had a picture of him based on things he did, things he said—or was supposed to have done and said. But the medieval man had mystery: The nature of this figure who lived life so intensely that his image projected itself after death onto his shroud was no problem to absorb for one who had taken spirit manifestations and advice from the great beyond in her stride. Its

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attraction was that *she* could create him from his image. From the fact, that body, she could mould a figure in whom she could believe.

"A man of Turin," she said out loud. "Perhaps the ancestor of a man, even many men, living in Turin today."

Two whiskys later, as she drifted off into sleep, the image of the man was gaining substance. A man who filled every minute with vitality, experience, passion; one who "loaded every rift with ore" because he sensed that his life would be short. A man who lived and understood life so completely and intensely would be one who understood others, saw through to their essence, knew and forgave them because life was not for the saints and the mystics and the hermits. It was a messy business for all the rest—people who tried to engage with it totally.

The next day Violetta took the train to Turin. Coming out of the magnificent station, she saw the Grand Palace Hotel. Somewhere a little bit grander than she was used to. Somewhere where she might entertain people . . . someone. She walked across, found they had a room vacant, and took it.

That evening she did no more than prowl around the environs of the hotel and station, dropping into a little restaurant for pasta and then swordfish. She read the Terry Pratchett she had brought with her. It would be ostentatious to read about the shroud in Turin itself.

The next day she really set out to explore the city. She walked and walked, her eyes darting everywhere as she fluttered from wide street into spacious square.

Eventually, she knew, she would go and see the shroud. The real thing was on exhibition for millennium year. Normally only a copy was shown, even to the faithful. But the shroud could wait. She skirted the great squares of the old Piedmontese capital, sometimes glancing at the expensive shops, but usually trailing her eyes restlessly from face to face, from besuited business executives to overalled plumbers and builders, from waiters and bus drivers to tourists in shorts and loud shirts. After an hour or more she sat down at a table in an outdoor cafe on the Piazza Castello.

"Una spremuta di arancia, per favore." she asked the waiter, after subjecting him to a prolonged but unsatisfactory scrutiny.

Restlessly she resumed her inspection of the townsmen from afar. Absentmindedly she stirred sugar into her *spremuta*. Tasted it—delicious. She sat back in her chair.

Then, suddenly, she saw him. She would have said to the end of her life, if she had lived long, that an emanation from him came across the huge square from the royal palace at the far side and seized her. Perhaps the truth was that he was standing in the middle, and matched from afar the specifications of what she was

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seeking. Tall, bearded—and even from a distance, she felt sure, magnetic. She slapped notes down on the table and left the cafe, crossing the road, then into the main body of the Piazza Castello. Now she could see him from a distance of twenty yards or so, still looking in her direction. Suddenly he turned and walked in the direction of the royal palace. There was no question what Violetta would do. She had already marked it down as one of her sort of places. Now it moved to being a top priority.

She strode ahead, almost running in her eagerness not to lose sight of him—past tourists feeding the birds, past a newsstand with a placard reading: ANCORA UNA DONNA UCCISA. She gained the entrance to the palace and saw him coming out of the ticket office-cum-bookshop. Breathless by now, she ran in and again slapped money down. The woman behind the grille told her that a tour started in five minutes. Trying to get her breath back, she stood for a moment outside, under the dark arches that bordered the central courtyard. There was a little knot of people to her left, and cautiously she went over and mingled with them. Almost all seemed to be tourists. But there, among them, he was: tall, solidly built, with the bushy beard and long hair of the shroud giving him the air of a young patriarch. He was half turned away from her so she could not see his eyes. Then a small woman came along to herd them together, apologising for her poor English but explaining that in every room there was a notice in three languages explaining the room's contents and purpose. Violetta wondered whether the Man of the Shroud spoke English.

Once they got past the magnificent staircase, it was easy to keep close to him. Sometimes she darted up to the notices and ostentatiously read the English text. It was in the third room, the Queen's Reception Room, that he came up behind her and spoke to her.

"You like palaces and such things?"

His voice was soft but urgent, his English heavily accented but seductive. Seductive on a high intellectual and spiritual plane, Violetta decided.

"Very much," she answered, smiling up at him. Now she could see his eyes, which had a piercing intensity. "This one is very fine, if maybe a little musty."

"Musty? What is musty? You hexplain?"

"Musty—well, it's old, a bit shabby, decaying a little."

"Ah, I understand. But it is old. Nothing 'as been done to it for years. The kings of Savoy, they became kings of Hitaly, then kings of nowhere at all. You see?"

"Very well. You speak beautiful English."

"Not at all. I need a good teacher. So you see, no one 'as lived 'ere for years, for a century and a 'alf. So it become a bit musty, like you say. But full of 'istory."

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"Yes, it's certainly that. Was this king who became King of Italy the one called Victor Emmanuel, or was that later?"

"Italy have two kings called Vittorio Emanuelle, two called Umberto. The wife of the first King Umberto, Queen Margherita, she 'ave a pizza named after her."

"Oh, of course."

"The second Umberto, 'e die in exile, and 'e give the shroud to the Cathedral."

"Really? The shroud! . . . Has anyone ever told you that you look like the man in the shroud?"

The man—still she did not know his name—shrugged.

"Some."

"Plenty of women, I should think."

"Some. Men and women." He said it distinctly, as if offended.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to suggest you were a ladykiller."

She did not notice his faint start.

"What is that—a lady-what?"

"Ladykiller. It's another word for a Don Juan or a Casanova."

"Ah—a Casanova. Maybe all Italian men have a little bit of a Casanova in them."

"Maybe they do. . . . Do you live in Turin?"

"Yes—I have a little flat."

She nearly asked him what a native of Turin was doing going on a conducted tour of one of its monuments with a party of tourists, but she bit the question back.

"It must be a wonderful city to live in."

"It is very hexciting. It suits me. I live my life fully and eagerly."

"I'm sure you do!" She said it not flirtatiously but seriously. "I felt that, too, about the man in the shroud."

"You did?"

"Scientists who have carbon-dated it say it's not two thousand years old, just six hundred or so. I had the idea, the image of a man of the Middle Ages or the Renaissance who had lived life to the full, with such energy, such zest. . . . Eagerly, like you said."

"Maybe you are right. Maybe he was my many-greats grandfather."

They looked at each other and laughed. If she had not been under the spell of the shroud, she might have seen that his eyes were cold, that they belied his laugh.

The tour of the royal apartments was coming to an end. They emerged into the courtyard of the palace, then through an arch back to the Piazza Castello. Violetta could see her man for the first time in the sunlight. How strong the mouth was, how bright the eyes! He was even more exciting than she had thought.

"I've been so glad of your company. Could I buy you coffee? Or lunch—it's not far off lunchtime."

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"Alas—I have to go back to my flat, my studio. I am a poor artist. I must get images from the palace into my sketchbook—mere stuff for the tourist trade, you understand, but my living. This hevening. What about dinner this hevening?"

"What a good idea!" said Violetta, at last giving way to her girlish flirtatiousness. "Why don't you come to my hotel? I believe the Grand's dining room is excellent. Or we could go out to a restaurant."

The man shook his head.

"I am not a person to call at a respectable hotel. I would not compromise a fine lady like yourself—me, a poor, dirty artist. You come to my flat. I cook you a fine meal, authentic, something handed down in my family for generations."

"How exciting!"

"I promise you, exciting! Here is my card. You come at eight?"

"Eight o'clock," she said, looking at the card. "Mario Pertusi."

"But you can call me Casanova. The ladykiller."

They both laughed again. She wished she could kiss him her *arrivederci,* but she just said it and raised her hand, walking away across the square, past the newsstand with its shrieking headline, past the cafes and the banks and the tourist office. Before plunging into the small streets leading to the Cathedral she looked round, but her poor eyesight did not allow her to see Mario Pertusi still watching her from the entrance to the Palazzo Madama, his eyes cold and searing, his thin-lipped mouth open in anticipation.

And while Pertusi went back to his studio flat, with its crude drawings of women in notebook after notebook, its worse-than-amateur attempts at oil paintings of screaming red mouths, bulging eyes, slashed breasts, which he now turned with practised hand to the wall, Violetta went to the Cathedral and the queue to see the shroud, under skies that were clouding over fast. She was told that you had to buy a ticket to see it, and that the ticket office (of course) was elsewhere, back in the Piazza Castello. When she had bought it and taken it back to the Cathedral, she was told that the ticket was for admittance at a certain time—at seven o'clock that evening, in fact.

"Are you trying to keep the damned thing secret?" she yelled at the scandalised priest on the door, then turned and ran out into the heavy rain which had now been pouring for five minutes. She looked around at the sodden nuns, at the priests with little groups from their villages, the women's groups that bore an awful resemblance to British Women's Institutes. She screwed up her ticket and dropped it on the Cathedral steps.

"I don't need to see him," she said. "I've seen him."

She made her way, absurdly happy and at peace, back to the Grand Hotel. She didn't need lunch—couldn't face anything so

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mundane. In her room she bathed, then lay on her bed dreaming, *seeing* him—the all-forgiving eyes, the air of vast and varied experience, the presence of a man who took on his shoulders the whole burden of sinning humanity.

Soon she sank into a light doze. Then she got up, put on her best and silkiest underclothes, her smartest dress. She emptied her bag to find his card and looked at his address. That was easy enough: a tiny street off the Via dell' Accademia. She could hardly wait, but forced herself to. To drink whisky would be like some kind of profanation. She must have all her senses alert, alive. At last it was time. She skirted the Piazza Carlo Felice till she found the Street of the Academy. At last she found Mario's little road, and number twelve. It was an old house, shabby, dirtied by a million Fiats, by the dust and grime of passing humanity. There were no bells on the outside, but plenty of light inside. He had put them on for her. Third floor, it had said on the card. She went inside and walked up the stairs, hardly able to contain her excitement. There were two flats on the third floor, one seemingly empty. On the other was the name: MARIO PERTUSI. She waited for one delicious moment.

Then she rang the bell to begin her assignation with her shroud. ●

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Art by Mark Evan Walker

Old Eyes

by Nancy Pickard

Johnny "Flowers" Sunvoldt: *So I gotta go to this hall where they have all these old people who, like, don't have nothin' else to do all day but play cards and drool. And me and my man Reebok and these other guys I don't know, we're supposed to, like, interact with the geezers. It's this new probation program they've got that's supposed to rehabilitate us. If we do this community service for a year, we get outta doing jail time. It's going to be boring. I got to do it five mornings a week or they snap my probation. What the hell. Like I got a choice?*

Mona Riser: *This is a terrible idea the director has. Terrible. Wait until I tell Manny about this. "What is she thinking?" he'll say. "She wants to help too many people all at the same time," I'll say, "but she's supposed to be helping us senior citizens, if you'll pardon the expression, not some young punks." What is she thinking, to try to mix people as different as them and us? I'm looking at these boys coming in and I'm Jewish and old and they're mean and teenagers. They wouldn't be here if they weren't criminals, just like the terrible boy who mugged me. I'm getting over it physically, but I'll never get*

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over it really. He hurt me in my heart and my body and my pocketbook. I'm not going to talk to these terrible boys. I'm not going to have anything to do with any of them.

Johnny "Flowers" Sunvoldt: *Shit, so we each get assigned to one of the geezers. Reebok's got the one over there in the corner watching* The Price Is Right. *And I'm supposed to help out that old woman eating pudding at that table. What do these people think we're going to do, turn the TV on and off for them? Feed 'em the pudding? This is so stupid. That director is watching me.*

An Anthony and Macavity award winner, Nancy Pickard has distinguished herself as a mystery writer by giving a contemporary twist to the traditional mystery. Though the field she works in is perhaps the most convention-bound of all the subgenres of mystery, she is not afraid to bend the rules—as is evident in her very unconventional way of telling the following story. A new Pickard novel in paperback, *The Whole Truth,* came out last year. †

Mona Riser: *That boy is coming over here.*

"You mind I sit down?"

"It's a free country."

Johnny "Flowers": *She don't even look at me. Like I'm pond scum. Like I actually want to be sitting here, like I even want to talk to her, like she's the queen and I'm dirt. I'll make her look at me.*

"So what do they call you?"

"Home for dinner."

"What? Oh, ha ha. Your name's Riser, that's what the director told me."

"Then why did you ask me?"

"Being polite, unlike some people. What kind of name is Riser?"

"I beg your pardon. A Jewish name."

"Yeah? You Jewish?"

"No, I'm Southern Baptist, my parents just had a warped sense of humor."

What a bitch. "Like you, maybe."

"Yes, I'm perpetually amused."

"What's this I got on my face?"

"A nose."

"Made you look at me, didn't I?"

"What a pleasure. You don't have to entertain me. I can take care of myself."

"Don't have a heart attack having so much fun."

Johnny "Flowers": *Where have I seen her before? Those scared eyes. Shit! I know where I seen her before! I lifted a couple hundred*

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dollars off this old broad! Wait'll I tell Reebok, he won't even believe it. Does she recognize me? Nah. Probably can't see worth a damn. But man, what a coincidence. This could be fun. Wonder if she still carries that much cash in her pocketbook. New pocketbook. Hah. I could tell her where her old one is, which trash can. This is too damned funny. Hell, I'm wearing her money, right here in this jacket I got on. If she only knew. She don't know what to think about me smiling at her, suddenly being so friendly.

Mona: *What's he grinning at me for? Oh God! I'm going to have a heart attack! It's him, it's that terrible boy who mugged me! He doesn't recognize me. Why should he? All he would recognize if he saw it again is my pocketbook. Should I tell somebody? No! He'll hurt me if I do. He'll come after me like they come after witnesses, and he'll kill me this time. I'll tell Manny, but nobody else. This is terrible! Oh, I could kill that director! How can I bear this, seeing that boy day after day in here? I should stop coming. But he might suspect something, he might find out where I live. Oh, I can't think straight, and my heart is beating so hard. I've got to act as if nothing's wrong. I can't let him know.*

"What'd you say your name is?"

"They call me Flowers."

"Because why?"

"I look so pretty and I smell so sweet."

"Better watch it. Flowers don't live long."

"Yeah, well, I'm not expecting to anyway."

Couldn't be too soon.

I could charm the cash outta your purse.

Get away from me!

"You and me, we're gonna be good friends, Miz Riser."

"Mrs."

"Mrs., huh? Where's he?"

"My husband Aaron died fifty-five years ago in a Nazi concentration camp. You know what those were?"

"I look stupid? Of course I know what that was. What happened to him?"

"I don't know. They put us on different trains, and I never saw him again."

"Where was this?"

"Poland. A little town you never heard of."

"You don't got no idea what I heard of and what I don't. I know stuff you ain't never heard of."

"I'm sure."

"You ever try to find out what happened to him?"

"Of course! You think I didn't care? I couldn't find any trace of him."

"You still don't talk English all that good."

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"Neither do you."
"That's real funny, Miz Mona."
"I live to amuse you, Mr. Flowers."
Maybe you don't live for long, bitch.
Mean ignorant boy.
"I'm leaving. See you tomorrow, Miz Riser, ma'am."
"I'll get here early for that."

Mona Riser: "He is the boy who robbed me, Manny. Now he's going to do it again, I know he is. I'm going to make it possible for him. Only this time you're going to be there, right where we walk through the alley, and you're going to be my witness. Yes, I could get hurt. No, I can't have the police do it, because they might call it . . . what do you call it . . . entrapment, that's the word. You have to do it. You have to say you were just standing in the doorway in the shadows. Where the boy can't see you. And you watch the whole thing, how he knocks me down, how he steals my purse and runs away. I know it'll hurt, you old fool! But how else are we going to catch him in the act?"

"How old are you, Flowers?"
"Sixteen."
"Going on eighty-two."
"What you mean by that?"
He has old eyes. "You probably won't live as long as some of these old men in here."
"Yeah, so what? Why would I want to live long enough to end up here?"
"I have no answer for that."
"You want me to get you some pudding?"
"It's terrible pudding."
"Looks like shit to me."
"I want a pizza."
"They serve that here?"
"I'll give you the money, you go get it for us."
"You trust me with your money?"
"You'd break your probation for seven dollars?"
"We could get two medium pizzas for ten dollars."
"I can't eat that much."
"I can."
"What's your mother feed you?"
"I take care of myself."
"Not very well, obviously."
"I don't recall asking you a question that required that answer."
"You're beginning to talk like me. I hope that doesn't mean I

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have to start talking like you. All right, get the ten-dollar pizza just this once."

What a riot, her giving me her money so I can eat lunch.

What a fool, believing that I trust him.

"What kind of pizza do you want, Mizzus Mona?"

"The cheapest kind. Don't be getting any breadsticks."

"Maybe I'll sneak a couple of beers in for us."

"Why not? It's not as if I would be contributing to the delinquency of a minor."

"Why not? I'm a minor."

"Yes, but you're already a delinquent."

"Sometimes you really hurt me."

"I'm sure."

"Pepperoni."

"Italian sausage."

"Half and half."

"All right, but don't go over nine dollars."

"You said ten."

"I changed my mind. I won't get my social-security check for another week. Every dollar counts, young man."

And I'm the one who will be counting them, old lady.

Johnny "Flowers" Sunvoldt: "I'm telling you, Reebok, this is a perfect setup. She cashes her check, I snatch it. It'll be easy as taking candy from a baby. A really stupid baby who don't learn fast."

"Hey, Miz Mona, where were you yesterday?"

"I didn't come in."

"Well, duh. I know that. You sick? What happened?"

"Nothing happened."

"Yeah, it did, I can tell by lookin' at you. You don't look like yourself."

"That would be an improvement."

"Hah. That's more like it. That sounds like you. What happened yesterday?"

"Will you quit with the what happened, Flowers? Nothing happened yesterday."

"Well, when *did* it happen?"

"You are too smart for me."

"It's about time you appreciated that. You gonna tell me?"

"It didn't happen yesterday, it happened fifty-five years ago."

"Wait a minute, I remember, don't tell me."

"Why should you remember? It doesn't mean anything to anybody but me."

"Your husband, right? Something about yesterday?"

"It was the anniversary of the last day I ever saw him."

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"How come you never got married again?"
"Some things it hurts too much to do twice, Flowers."
"You stay here. I'll be right back."
"Where would I go?"
"Paris. New York. Who cares? But stay put."
Who cares? That's right. Nobody cares. Why should they?

"You think I wasn't really coming back, Mizzus Mona?"
"I knew better than to hope."
"I think you're more sarcastic than I am."
"That's because I've lived longer."
"Even if I am sixteen going on eighty-two?"
"I'm eighty-three."
"Here."
"What? Is this ham? I'm Jewish, you forget?"
"It ain't ham, for God's sake, it's turkey salami."
"Why don't they just call it turkey?"
"You want this sandwich or not?"
"Where'd you get it?"
"I stole it for you."
"My God! Who from?"
"One of the geezers. That bald guy over there."
"Jerome? I can't stand him. Give me the sandwich."
"You could say please."
"I could say thank you."
"All right, then."
"Don't expect a pizza tomorrow."
"I'm not expecting nothin'. Besides, you don't get your check for another three days."
"That's right, so you can't marry me for my money yet."
"Well, damn."

"What you gonna do with all your money tomorrow?"
"Buy a yacht, of course."
"Maybe you'll buy me something."
"Maybe I'll pay my rent and my utilities and go to the grocery store."
"How far you live from the grocery store?"
"Ten blocks."
"You carry bags home by yourself?"
"I eat light. Sometimes my friend Manny helps me. Not like you."
"What do you mean, not like me? Who got you a sandwich yesterday?"
"Yeah, you walked clear across the room for me."
"I could help you. I could carry your grocery bags tomorrow."
"Oh, sure."

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"When do you go?"

"Right after I get my check. I get my groceries and I cash the rest of the check there. You won't tell anybody I told you that?"

"Don't look so worried! What you think I am?"

"I think you are what you are."

"How come you never ask what my crime was?"

"It might scare me to death."

"That's the truth."

"See?"

"I couldn't help you until after dark."

"Why not?"

"Got a job."

"Good."

"But I could meet you outside the grocery store at nine P.M., and help you get home with the bags."

"That's late for me to be out walking on these streets."

"Okay, I'll come get you and we'll walk to the store together and then I'll walk you back home."

"Why would you do that for me?"

"So you'll tell my probation officer I'm a boy scout."

"All right. I'll let you help me across the street."

Yes.

Flowers: "Yes, we're still going to do it, will you shut up about it? I planned this, didn't I? Okay, one more time: I walk her to the grocery store, she cashes her check, buys her groceries, I carry them out for her. She and me, we start walkin' her home. We get in the alley. You're waitin' at the other end. I drop her bags. I hit her hard where she can't see me. She don't know for sure it's me. I hit her again, make sure she's out of it. I grab her purse, I run out of the alley and throw it to you, and you take off with it. I scream for somebody to call the cops. I go back and help her. Cops come. I'm still there bein' helpful. She don't accuse me 'cause she don't know it was me. She says I was helpin' her. I get in good with my probation officer. You and me, we split it seventy-thirty. . . . Fifty-fifty my ass, Reebok, it ain't you been cultivating her all this time. It ain't you takin' the biggest chance. Now you got it? Don't be askin' me about it no more. I'm sick of talkin' about it. We'll just do it like I planned, that's all, we'll just do it."

"Today's the day, Flowers."

"What day's that?"

"Grocery day. You forget already you were going to help me?"

"Did I say that?"

"You're not really going to do it, are you? You were all talk. That's okay by me. Don't do it. I don't care. I don't need your help."

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"Ten blocks back and forth is a long way."
"I've done it before."
"What time did I say?"
"After dark, you said."
"What time is that?"
"The store's open all night, but I'm not awake all night."
"Nine o'clock, okay?"
"That's late for me, but if you insist."
"Who's insisting?"
"I don't need help."
"Fine, you can carry your own bags."
"I always do."
"You better tell me where you live."
"What *was* your crime?"
"Look, if you don't trust me then why—"
"Twenty-three thirteen Broadway, Number two, first floor, back on the left."
"Maybe I'll be there."
"Listen, I could go in the daylight. If you don't come—"
"I was kidding you."
"I won't be laughing if you don't—"
"I'll be there."
"Fine."
"Okay."

"How come you buy that kind of peanut butter?"
"It's the cheapest."
"If you had kids, they wouldn't like it."
"Well, I don't."
"How come?"
"They died with their father."
"In the war, in the concentration camp?"
"I think so."
"You don't know for sure?"
"I don't know anything for sure."
"Here. Just try this kind of peanut butter. I guarantee you'll like it better."
"It costs ten cents more."
"I'll pay for it, for Christ's sake."
"Don't use the Lord's name in vain."
"What do you care? You're Jewish."
"Don't use *any* God's name in vain. Your grandmother wouldn't like it."
"I ain't got a grandmother."
"You had to, sometime. You had to have two of them. Are they dead?"

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"Everybody's dead."

"Not me. Unfortunately."

"You want to be dead?"

"Sometimes."

"Then why don't you kill yourself?"

"I don't know. Get me that frozen spinach, Flowers. The cold makes my hands hurt."

"You eat this stuff? Man, I'm glad you're not my grandmother."

"If you were my grandson, I wouldn't make you eat spinach."

"Yeah, you probably would, knowing you."

"Well, that just shows you don't know me. If you were my little grandson, I would bake you chocolate-chip cookies, and I would serve them to you right out of the oven while they were still hot and the chocolate chips were melting. And I'd give you a big glass of cold milk to go with them. And there would be plenty for your friends."

"I don't got any friends except for Reebok."

"Isn't that the name of a shoe?"

"It's the only kind he'll steal."

"I see. Logical, I guess."

"You sure eat a lot of canned vegetables."

"For a person who would rather be dead, I have a strange desire to stay healthy. What? Was that funny?"

"You're usually funny. Let me ask you something. And get some fresh fruit, will you? You can't just eat vegetables. A little hamburger wouldn't kill you, either, you know. So what I want to know is, if life never gets any better than this, why should a person keep living?"

"I don't know, Flowers, except that I always have the feeling that at any moment it could suddenly get better."

"After eighty-two years?"

"Eighty-three."

"Well?"

"I'm thinking. And my answer is, it could hardly get any worse, could it?"

"Yeah, actually, it could get real worse real soon. Like, I mean, like you could fall down and be paralyzed, something like that. You could lose all your money and starve to death, or freeze to death. It could get worse."

"And I thought I was the pessimist."

"You need anything else?"

"No, that's enough for you to carry."

"No, really, if you need anything else—"

"I've got it all."

"All right then, you pay, and let's go."

"Don't forget the ten cents you owe me."

"What for?"

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"The expensive peanut butter."

"Ten cents! Can't that be my tip? Don't I get a tip?"

"Here's a tip for you: Don't buy the expensive peanut butter. What's so funny?"

"Nothing. Wait a minute. Here's your dime."

"Keep it."

"A tip. I knew it."

"You don't know anything."

"Flowers? Why aren't you talking? Did I insult you just then? Me and my mouth. I didn't mean to insult you."

"You didn't insult me."

"You're helping me. I wouldn't want to insult somebody who helped me."

"Forget it, you didn't insult me. Give me the bags. You just carry your purse."

"It's heavy now."

"Sure, all that money. You're rich."

"Hah. Sometimes you're pretty funny yourself."

"Those bags too heavy?"

"No."

"I changed my mind about the way to go. Don't go through the alley. Let's go around the long way."

"Why? It's shorter through the alley."

"I know, but it's dark, it scares me. I got mugged once."

"You don't want to go through there with me, do you?"

"It's not you—"

"Yeah, it is. You think I'm going to rob you or something?"

"I just don't want to go in there. It's nothing to do with you."

"Here. Take your freaking groceries. Find your own way home."

"I can't carry all this by myself!"

"You should have thought of that."

"Flowers—"

Manny: "Where's Mona? What'd you do to my friend?"

"Who the hell are you, old man? You were waiting in here for us, weren't you? She thought I was going to mug her, and you were going to catch me, weren't you? Weren't you?"

"Yes, yes! She recognized you, you punk. You hurt her before."

"So why didn't she do it? Why didn't she come in the alley with me?"

"I don't know! I'll yell! Let go of me!"

"Why didn't she?"

"Let go of me!"

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Reebok: "Where's the purse, man?"

"No purse. Forget it. Get out of here."

"Forget it? I been standing here for two hours, Flowers!"

"I said, forget it. She wouldn't come in the alley with me. She went home the long way. We're not gettin' the money."

"Maybe you're not, but this ain't stoppin' me."

"Reebok, what you doin'? Come back here!"

Mona: *I'm such an old fool. I've left poor Manny standing in the doorway in a dark alley, and I've had to leave half my groceries on the sidewalk. And now I'm walking down these streets alone at night with all of my money in my purse. I'm a fool. Please God, things don't have to get better, but please, don't make them get any worse. Oh my God, I hear footsteps behind me. Please let me die of fear before somebody kills me. I've got nothing to lose, I might as well turn around and look death in the eye. Oh! I know this boy!*

"Give me the purse, bitch."

"No."

"All right, you want to get hurt, have it your way—Shit, Flowers, where you come from? Flowers, what you doin'? Get off me, man! Stop hitting me! I'm just gettin' our money! Get off me! I'm outta here. You crazy, man!"

Flowers: "You all right, Mona?"

"Yes. Are you?"

"I'll take that bag. Where'd you leave the other one?"

"Back at the mouth of the alley."

"You feel up to coming back with me to get it?"

"Sure, I don't have much strength left in my legs, but we can take the shortcut home."

"Through the alley? You sure about that?"

"I'm sure."

"Your friend might still be there."

"Well, then we'll just walk him home, too."

"I may have scared him to death."

"We were going to trap you."

"I figured that out. We were going to mug you."

"I figured that out."

"We're a couple of pretty smart cookies, I guess."

"For a couple of dumb bunnies. What's so funny?"

"You, Mona, you're so funny. Let me ask you something. If I was to help you do this once a week, and you was to pay me, which you don't have to do, but if you was, how much would you pay me?"

"A buck."

"A buck, that's all?"

"Take it or leave it."

"I guess I have to take it. I stole two hundred dollars off you.

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That means you get two hundred free trips to the grocery store with me."

"But that would mean I have to live four more years."

"Tough. It means I will, too."

"Don't expect chocolate chip cookies."

"I don't expect nothing."

"I don't either."

"That's good."

"Fine. Oh, there you are, Manny. Stop yelling! I want to introduce you to somebody. This is my young friend Flowers, who helps me carry my groceries home. Close your mouth, Manny, you look like gefilte fish. Oy, Flowers, that's what I forgot to buy!"

"We're not going back."

"Did I ask?"

"I got a life, you know."

"Oh, and such a one it is, too. . . . Manny? Will you hurry up? The boy's got a life, you know, he can't spend all night waiting on old people like us. Life! You think you got a life, I could tell you about a life . . ." ●

Shirley, I Been Thinkin'

by Broek Wolften

Shirley'd had a husband
who'd had the sense to leave
before she courted Donald.
(Or she'd lead us to believe.)

Donald's wife was faithful
and, perhaps, a bit naive.
An "overdose and alcohol"
gave her children cause to grieve.

Shirley married Donald
and, just to set the tone,
eliminated all the kids,
and made a happy home.

Then Donald died unusually.
Now Shirley's all alone.
It's funny how the money
keeps her in the comfort zone.

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WASTED YOUTH

by Scott Mackay

Detective Barry Gilbert stooped over the body of the young man and took a whiff.

"Any alcohol?" asked Gilbert's partner, Detective Joe Lombardo.

"No," said Gilbert. Gilbert looked up the stairs. The stairs led to the editorial offices of *U-2nite,* a modish entertainment weekly geared toward young people. Sturdy railings were bolted into either wall. Gilbert couldn't understand how the young man could have fallen down the stairs with those railings there, and believed he had been pushed.

"Is his brother on the way?" asked Gilbert.

"He should be here in fifteen minutes," said Lombardo. Lombardo glanced at the stack of fresh *U-2nite*s on the third step up. "Do you ever read it?"

Gilbert glanced at the paper, a weekly with an underground look to it. "No," he said.

"They've got great club listings."

"I don't go to clubs," said Gilbert. "I'm too old."

Gilbert gazed at the young man, Terry Aberfoyle according to his wallet, twenty-five years old, short dark hair, a moustache and goatee, a man who reminded Gilbert of a 1950s beatnik. He wore a black T-shirt, a brown suede jacket three sizes too big, black-framed glasses, and had a laptop in a Targus computer bag slung around his shoulder. So young, thought Gilbert. Every year the victims got younger and younger.

While Lombardo supervised the removal of the body, Gilbert went upstairs and looked around. Drywall and strapping had been

Scott Mackay, author of thrillers, science fiction novels, mystery novels, and award-winning mystery stories (his 1998 *EQMM* story "Last Inning" won the Arthur Ellis Award for Best Short Story), has returned to his Barry Gilbert/ Joe Lombardo police series this month. The case is a poignant one; if you like it, look for the latest Gilbert/ Lombardo novel, *Fall Guy* (St. Martin's Minotaur/August '01). ¶

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pulled away on one side to reveal a red brick firewall. Trendy. Seven desks, three on one side, four on the other, took up most of the office. Various graphics equipment occupied a large space at the front. He saw four computers. Stacks and stacks of this week's issue sat against the wall. He saw the detritus of young people working hard: a half-finished carton of Coors Lite; cigarette butts stamped out on the floor; a pile of marijuana seeds on a drafting table; a badly stained espresso maker sitting on a hot plate; five pizza boxes stacked by the door. He took a deep breath and looked out the window where the rain came down steadily.

To be young again, he thought. To be able to eat so much pizza.

He examined a small Polaroid pinned to a bulletin board next to the window. The Polaroid showed Terry Aberfoyle and a young woman. The woman was dark, beautiful. She had her arms around Terry, was hanging off him, kissing his cheek. Gilbert was just wondering who this woman might be when he heard heavy boots on the stairs.

A young man appeared at the door. He had long dark hair, a narrow face, was tall, skinny, wore a beret, a silk tie-dyed scarf, and a full-length olive-green army trench coat. The man was around twenty-seven, rakish and unkempt, wore black combat boots.

"Where is he?" asked the man.

"And you are?" asked Gilbert.

"I'm Gord," said the young man. "I'm his brother. I run this place."

Gilbert took a deep breath, wondered not for the first time if he could someday come up with a formula that would cushion the blow, a painless way to tell the dearly beloved about the dear departed.

"You were talking to my partner?" asked Gilbert.

"Is Terry okay?" asked Gord, then looked around the weekly's office as if he expected to see Terry sitting at one of the desks.

"Your brother's had an accident," said Gilbert. "I'm afraid he's dead."

But there was no formula, and he always ended up giving the news straight, like a doctor jabbing a needle in a patient's arm before the patient got the chance to ask whether it would hurt or not.

Gord stared at him. "What?" Breathless. Shocked. Gilbert couldn't decide on the color of his eyes. Gray? Blue? Or the steely color of newborn eyes? Gord stood there. He looked puzzled, as if he couldn't imagine Terry ever having an accident, or ever actually dying. The young. They always had to learn things for themselves.

"I'm sorry," said Gilbert.

"What kind of accident?" asked Gord.

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"He fell down the stairs," said Gilbert.

Gord frowned. "How could he fall down the stairs?" he asked. Like he wanted to argue about it.

"He could have been pushed," said Gilbert. "Were you here tonight? What was Terry doing here tonight?"

Gord's face went slack. Gilbert wasn't sure what he saw in his eyes. Grief? Dread? Fear?

"He was doing *Le Fauçon,*" said Gord. He stumbled a few steps, sat on one of the desks to steady himself, bowed his head, held the bridge of his large nose between his thumb and index finger, and took a few deep breaths. He held his breath for a second or two. Then he pulled himself together. "At the Théâtre Français de Toronto," he said. He looked at Gilbert with bewildered eyes. "He was there to review it."

His voice was shaky now, ragged. He glanced at the stairwell, scene of the accident.

"Are you okay?" asked Gilbert.

"I imagine he came here to drop off the disk."

"What disk?"

"The disk with his review on it," said Gord. "So Connie could do the layout tomorrow morning."

"Does Terry drink?" asked Gilbert.

"No." And again he held the bridge of his nose, closed his eyes, bowed his head . . . then looked at Gilbert, annoyed now, as if he just wanted Gilbert to get on with it so he could crumble to pieces by himself somewhere.

"Does he do drugs?" asked Gilbert.

"No."

"How many on staff here?"

"Five editorial staff. Look, where's my brother?" asked Gord, angry. "I have to phone my parents."

"He's on his way to the coroner's building," said Gilbert. He pushed on, knowing he had only so much time before the shock took serious hold. "Were you here late tonight? Did you see your brother here?"

"I left at six," said Gord. Petulant. Impatient. Looking around, checking the office, like he didn't trust Gilbert.

"And where did you go?"

"I went home."

"And where's home?" asked Gilbert.

"Hogarth. Number fifteen."

Gord's eyes misted over. His replies were getting shorter. More choked. The two of them stood there. The rain beat against the windows. Gilbert tried one last thing.

"I was looking at that Polaroid of your brother over there on the bulletin board," he said. "Any idea who the woman is?"

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"That's Connie."

"Connie," said Gilbert. "The layout person."

"Yes."

"So Connie was his—" Gilbert was fishing.

"Not anymore," said Gord. "They broke up. They lived together for a year. I'm surprised that picture's still up there."

"Could you give me the addresses and telephone numbers of the staff here?" asked Gilbert.

Gord went to the Rolodex and fished out the information.

"Do you know anybody who might want to kill your brother?" asked Gilbert, once he had all the information.

Gord took a few deep breaths. "No," he said. He looked out the window, just waiting for Gilbert to go.

"You better phone your parents," said Gilbert, backing off for now.

After a final few words with Lombardo—Lombardo was going back to College Street to fill out a twenty-four-hour report on the crime—Gilbert took the unmarked Impala to Connie Cruz's house in the East End. Connie Cruz, the layout person. Her house, a large bungalow, was painted white, had a black roof, black shutters, a grape arbor in the back, and a nine- or ten-year-old Honda station wagon in the drive. Gilbert wondered how a young woman like Connie could afford a house when everyone else on *U-2nite*'s editorial staff lived in apartments.

He knocked on the door.

Connie answered a few moments later.

When Gilbert told her the news, she sat down quickly. Sat on a piano bench in front of an old Baldwin upright, leaned back on it, her elbows hitting half white keys and half black keys. A dissonant chord, like a chord in the soundtrack of a horror movie, drifted up from the piano, lingered, grew fainter, and finally died away. Connie pushed herself up. The felt hammers pulled away from the piano wire with a knock. Connie was fully dressed. She had her jacket on. She looked as if she had just come in from somewhere. Maybe the editorial offices of *U-2nite.* When he asked her, she said she'd been out driving. Thin, as far as alibis went.

"He fell down the stairs," she said, in a breathy and distant tone, repeating what Gilbert had just told her.

Gilbert remained quiet. He gazed at the Latino woman. She was beautiful, just like in the Polaroid. And unbearably young. Gilbert wondered about Terry and Connie's breakup. Had it been amicable?

Connie got up. Walked over to the sofa, a black and white one with Spanish colonial designs, collapsed on the sofa, and poured a

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glass of red wine for herself. Gilbert glanced around. She had nice things.

"I was talking to Gord," he said.

Connie grew still. Her dark eyes narrowed. "And what did he say?" she asked.

"That you and Terry were . . . were living together."

"And that was it?" said Connie, as if she couldn't believe that's all Gord would have to say about it.

Gilbert shrugged. "Gord said he didn't know of anybody who might want to kill Terry. But if you lived with Terry . . . I just thought if you knew him that well . . ."

Connie took a sip of wine, stared at the ornate wrought-iron candelabra on the table. "No," she said. "I know no one."

Gilbert took a deep breath. "Were you at the office today?"

"Yes."

"And how late did you stay?"

"I left before Terry got there. I had a doctor's appointment. I don't like to be there when Terry gets there. He's always in such a bad mood. He sleeps until two in the afternoon. He gets to the office at three. He won't talk to anyone when he first gets there, least of all me. He just sits there at his desk and waits for Gord to make his espresso."

Gilbert asked Connie a bit about the newspaper, how it got started, who actually owned it, how the staff got along, who worked late, who went home early, whether there were any disagreements, any fights—tried to find an angle that might explain why Terry Aberfoyle had ended up dead at the bottom of the office stairs.

"I had a little extra money," said Connie. "I was trying to buy a share in the newspaper. They needed the money. I was trying to do them a favor. Gord and Terry never fought about the newspaper until I tried to buy a share in it. So there was some conflict there, but nothing serious. There was some conflict outside the office, between Terry and me. You can understand why. It hasn't been easy. Terry was difficult to live with. Moody. Uncommunicative. Territorial. I gave him every chance, but it finally became too much."

"You kicked him out?"

"He didn't know how to share," she complained. "He didn't know how to contribute. I have money. I've worked hard for that money. I have three jobs. He thinks that just because I have money I should pay his way. I don't think that way. He has to earn his own way. He was bad with money, and I was trying to teach him how to be better with it. I wanted to help him. But I wasn't going to pay his way. So I offered to buy his share."

"His share?" asked Gilbert, wanting to get it clear.

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"He wanted out," she said, as if that were answer enough.

"He did?"

"I was going to buy his share and kick in some equity besides, for Gord's sake. To really give the weekly a chance."

"And Terry really wanted out?" asked Gilbert.

"Terry was sick of the paper," said Connie. "He wanted to do something else. He was sick of writing theater and movie reviews. He wanted to go to France for a while. His mother has people over there. I liked that idea because I thought Gord and I would have a fighting chance with the paper if Terry went to France. Terry liked to party. Sometimes it was hard to get work done. He was disruptive."

Gilbert raised his eyebrows. "I thought you said he was moody."

"He was." She smiled sadly, shaking her head. "But sometimes he was a lot of fun, too. Too much fun."

"So you tried to buy Terry's share," he said. "Was Gord happy about that?"

"Gord needs help," said Connie, annoyed. "He sometimes forgets that his weekly is a business. He comes from an arts background, and that helps with editorial content, but he's made some foolish business decisions, things I can rectify if he gives me more control. If he gave me more control we might actually make some money." She frowned. "But everything's a religion with Gord. You can't convince him of anything. Everything's a cause. He's not willing to sacrifice even a few of his principles." She shook her head. "And that's why the paper's never going to make money."

"Several contusions from the fall," said Joe Lombardo, "bruises over his arms, and a laceration just above the left hip. The overall distribution of bruises suggests he fell while unconscious. Dr. Blackstein believes that sudden loss of consciousness at the top of the stairs might have been the direct cause of the fall." His young partner tapped the autopsy report. "The injuries Terry sustained from the fall were in no way life-threatening. He was alive but unconscious when he reached the bottom of the stairs. He died at the foot of the stairs some time after the fall."

Gilbert gazed down the aisle of desks where he saw Carol Reid, the squad secretary, testing out some new voice-activated dictation software on her PC.

"So Blackstein doesn't have any real idea about cause of death yet," said Gilbert, frustrated by the inconclusiveness of the autopsy.

"No," said Lombardo. "But he did find post-mortem evidence of a seizure. He suggested I call Terry's doctor for his medical history."

"And?"

Lombardo slid his hands into his stylish pleated pants. "Life's

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not that easy, Barry," he said. "The doctor's on holiday till next Tuesday. I got his answering service. The office is closed for the week."

Gilbert listened to Carol Reid talk into her computer. "Did Blackstein venture any guess at all about cause of death?"

"Only that Terry's seizure might have had a toxic etiology," said Lombardo.

"Really?"

Lombardo nodded. "The lab is going to run the toxicology battery on him this week."

Gilbert interviewed Tamara Post, girl Friday and restaurant critic for *U-2nite,* in the weekly's editorial office the next day. She was in her early twenties, timid, nervous. She was there alone. The others were taking time off. She had curly red hair, pale blue eyes, and an expression that looked perilously close to tears. She wore a big baggy sweater and big baggy pants, clothes she tried to hide in.

Gilbert asked her where she had been on the night of Terry's murder.

"I was here late," she said. "I was working on the features page and I wanted to get it done. I was the last one out. I left at nine." Her voice was soft, tremulous. "Terry got here around three. I didn't talk to him. I knew to stay away from him the minute he walked in. We all knew he was in a bad mood about something."

"So he didn't tell anybody what was bugging him?" asked Gilbert.

"No," said Tamara. "He just sat at his desk and didn't talk to anybody. He seemed tired. At least, more so than usual. Usually he'll edit a draft or two, but on Friday he came here and just sat. He stared out the window. He doesn't like the rain. The rain depresses him. I think the weather was getting him down."

"And you were gone by the time he returned from the theater later on?" asked Gilbert.

"Yes," she said. "I left at nine."

"And what time did Connie leave?"

"Connie left early to get her blood checked."

"Her blood checked?"

"Her doctor has to monitor the level of medication in her bloodstream," said Tamara. "She goes every week."

This was of some interest to Gilbert. A medication that had to be monitored every week might possibly have a high toxic content, and if Dr. Blackstein believed Terry's seizure had a toxic etiology, this was definitely worth looking at.

"What kind of medication is she on?" asked Gilbert.

Tamara's face reddened. "I'm not sure," she said.

But Gilbert saw Tamara knew exactly what kind of medication

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Connie was on. He wasn't going to push her. Tamara had the good sense to realize that Connie's medical information was confidential. He knew he couldn't go any further with this line of questioning right now so went back to getting the arrival and departure times straight.

"What time did Gord leave?" he asked.

"Gord left at six," she said.

Gilbert leaned forward, took a sip of his mineral water. "We're beginning to think Terry was murdered," he said.

She looked ready to fall apart at this news. She took a sip of her own mineral water, her eyes wide.

"I'll do whatever I can," she said.

Gilbert looked at her, pitying her for her youth, for how youth could be so painful sometimes. "Just stay out of trouble," he said, grinning, trying to be kind. "That will be enough."

She nodded, not grinning back, taking him seriously. "I will," she said.

"Were you aware that Terry wanted to sell his share of the paper to Connie?" asked Gilbert.

Her brow settled. "Yes," she said.

"Was that going to change the nature of the paper?"

She nodded. "Connie wanted to add a whole new buy-and-sell section to the paper," she said. "She wanted to include an automart, a renters' news, even a real-estate section. She wanted to change the weekly into an organ of commerce and cut back on the arts content."

"And Gord didn't want that?" asked Gilbert.

"Of course not."

"So they fought about that?" asked Gilbert.

"You should have heard them fight," she said. "They were like a couple of kids. Sometimes I had to leave. Neither of them knew how to compromise. I just wanted Terry to make up his mind. Either go with Gord or go with Connie, but don't keep them at each other's throats."

Joe Lombardo presented Gilbert with the toxicology results on Monday morning. Labor Day morning. Both of them were working overtime on the case.

"Terry had a serum lithium level of two-point-five micro-moles per liter in his blood," said Lombardo. "Symptoms of lithium overdose include seizure." Lombardo leaned forward, pressing his hands against Gilbert's desk. "I checked into Connie's medical condition, talked to her doctor, like you asked. He told me Connie's a controlled manic depressive. She takes lithium carbonate three times a day to control her condition. That's why her blood has to

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be monitored so closely." He straightened up. "It's got to be her, Barry."

Gilbert rested his chin on his palm and looked at the paperweight made of bullets on his desk. "So you think Connie used her own prescription to poison Terry?"

Lombardo tapped the toxicology report. "Who but Connie would think of using lithium to poison someone?" he asked. "She knows all about the drug." He raised his hands. "Not only that, she came to her doctor three weeks ago complaining she'd lost a whole bottle of the stuff. He had to write a replacement prescription for her. I don't think she lost it at all. I think she used it to poison Terry."

But Gilbert wasn't convinced. He had to find out more.

"I want to talk about the paper," he said.

Gord's eyes lit up. "What do you want to know?" he asked.

They sat in Gord's apartment. Labor Day afternoon now. A couch, a chair, a desk, a PC, a battered old acoustic guitar, a dust-covered sound system, and a dead avocado plant. On the wall, a single picture, the Karsh portrait of Ernest Hemingway. On the floor, a Persian carpet of 1960s Sears-Roebuck provenance. The twenty-something impoverished look.

"I want to know about Connie's bid to buy Terry's share of the paper," said Gilbert. "I understand there was some dispute about it."

Gord's eyes narrowed and he ran his hand through his long brown hair as his face settled. "There's not much to know," he said. "Terry wanted out. Connie saw an opportunity. Terry and I own the paper fifty-fifty. It's stated in our Articles of Incorporation that we share control over the paper. But we never included an equity investment clause. That means if someone puts a lot of money into the paper, they get control of it. Connie was going to kick in some extra equity after she bought Terry's share. That was the source of the dispute. Connie wanted control and I wasn't willing to give it to her."

Gilbert nodded. "Okay," he said.

Gord frowned, disappointed in Gilbert's reaction. "Connie's offer, in my opinion, was a rip-off," he said. "She had a lawyer look at the newspaper, all its assets, its debts, but not at its potential for growth. She came up with a figure based on the paper's book value. You know what that figure was?" he asked, his tone now incredulous. "Seventy-five grand. That's it. That's way off as far as I'm concerned. In terms of total potential, *U-2nite* is worth a lot more than that. If I were to make a public offering on the paper I'd get twenty-five times that amount."

"That much?" said Gilbert.

"Sure," said Gord. "Seventy-five grand is nothing. I tried to make

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Terry understand that Connie was trying to rip him off. Terry's not known for his common sense. I actually had him backing out of his deal with Connie before he died." He raised his dark eyebrows. "Did Connie tell you any of her plans for the paper?"

"Tamara mentioned them to me last week."

Gord lifted his hands. "She was going to turn it into a buy-and-sell weekly," he said. "This so undermines the basic purpose of the paper that I can't believe anybody would even think of it. She wanted to cut the entertainment section to five pages. She wanted to scrap the features page entirely. She doesn't seem to realize that we're an integral part of the underground scene here. If she cut the features page, it would sound the death knell for a lot of young musicians, writers, and artists in this city. I never started this paper to sell televisions and toasters. It's an entertainment weekly. Not a place to sell old junk."

Gilbert stared at Gord. Art versus commerce, the same old story, he thought. "So what did you do?" he asked.

Gord shrugged, exasperated. "What else could I do? I had to wait for Terry to make up his mind. Just like Connie did." He glanced at the threadbare Persian carpet on the floor. "And I almost had him siding with me before somebody killed him."

Gilbert glanced out the homicide office window. Labor Day evening now, and he didn't feel like eating his bagel and cream cheese.

"I agree that Connie might have a motive here, Joe," he said, "what with Terry backing away from her offer. Then there's their less than amicable breakup a couple months ago." He picked up a paper clip and tapped it against his desk. "I even agree that with the lithium angle we might have some evidence to support her possible guilt in this crime." He put the paper clip down and looked at Lombardo. "But what we don't have is opportunity." He leaned forward, rested his elbows on his desk. "I've been reading up on lithium. It has a strong taste. Connie would have to hide that somehow."

"She's smart. She figured out a way."

"I don't think so. For lithium to reach the necessary toxic levels, she'd have to give Terry several large doses over an extended period of time. I called Blackstein while you were getting the bagels. Blackstein thinks four or five tablets a day for at least five days. So how's Connie going to do that? I can see one or two tablets, one time only. But not four or five for a whole week. Not without Terry tasting it."

Gilbert and Lombardo went to the editorial offices of *U-2nite* with a court order the next day. Tamara was there to provide user names and passwords to the desktops.

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Gilbert first investigated Gord's computer. Lombardo started with Terry's.

Gilbert clicked on Internet Explorer, went to History, and accessed Gord's site-history file. Gord had it on a thirty-day setting; the file listed all the Web sites he had visited in the last month. Gilbert ruminated over the basic equation. Who was the murderer? A brother? Or a lover? Betrayal. Distilled into one word, a murder encapsulated. With Gord, there was financial betrayal. With Connie there was both emotional *and* financial betrayal. And of course, she was the one who used the lithium. Still, he felt uncertain, didn't want to arrest Connie until he could convincingly eliminate Gord. He searched the Web sites one by one, hoping to find something that might make things clearer, something—perhaps a lithium overdose site—that might incriminate Gord.

What he found surprised him.

He clicked on the site. Estate law, Ontario.

Beneficiaries in the event of no will.

A child predeceasing his parents in the event of no will.

"Joe, take a look at this," he said.

Lombardo came over and looked at the Web site.

"I think you've found something, Barry," said his partner.

Lombardo's cell phone rang. Lombardo answered. At first he didn't seem to know who it was. Then he moved off and started talking. Gilbert scanned the estate-law site once more. Was this worthwhile evidence? He wasn't sure. A lawyer defending Connie could probably use it to raise doubt, to implicate Gord. A lawyer defending Gord would discount the site, emphasize Connie's medical condition and lithium use, implicate Connie. He wasn't willing to make an arrest under those circumstances. It all came back to opportunity. If he couldn't prove opportunity, he didn't have a case.

Gilbert gazed around the office, thinking. He looked at the Web site Joe had up on Terry's computer—a travel agent, quotes on flights to Paris. He looked at Connie's desk; everything neatly arranged. His eyes moved to the hot plate. He looked at Terry's badly stained espresso maker. That jogged something. He sat up straight, felt connections falling into place.

"Tamara, was Gord the only one who ever made coffee for Terry?" he asked. "You didn't make it, did you?"

"No. Terry liked the way Gord made it," she said.

"And did anybody else drink it?"

"No," she said. "We all hate the stuff."

"I don't see a sink in here," said Gilbert. "Where did he fill it up?"

"There's a small kitchen at the end of the hall," she said.

Gilbert gazed at the espresso maker on the hot plate; the perma-

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nently darkened piece of kitchenware looked as if it were the veteran of a thousand demitasses. He felt a chill. What better way to hide the strong taste of lithium? Conceal it in something that had an equally strong taste. And what had a stronger taste than espresso? Terry drank espresso every day, Gord made it every day—a perfect opportunity for the necessary long-term accumulation. Not only that, the plan effectively incriminated Connie Cruz, Gord's rival in his fight to keep control of *U-2nite.*

Lombardo hung up. "That was Terry's doctor," he said. "He finally got back to me. Terry has no history of seizures or blackouts. I asked him if Terry was taking lithium for anything. He told me no."

"Joe, look at that espresso maker and tell me what you think," said Gilbert.

The implication was, of course, clear. The question of opportunity had at last been answered.

Forensic technicians quickly found lithium sediments in the bottom of the espresso maker. Gilbert talked to Connie and learned that she discovered the bottle of Lithotabs missing after a dinner party she had thrown for the staff of *U-2nite* a month ago. And in a telephone conversation with *U-2nite*'s lawyer, Gilbert learned that Terry, far from backing out of his deal with Connie, had been drawing up papers for the purpose of quickly closing it.

Two hours after the arrest of Gord Aberfoyle, Gilbert and Lombardo sat in the Duke of York, an English-style pub not far from headquarters, sipping Double Diamond.

"He seemed like such a smart young man," said Lombardo. "You wonder why he would take the risk."

"Because he thought he could get away with it," said Gilbert. "And because he thought he had a good plan." Gilbert took a sip of beer. "Think of it. He had circumstances going his way. The lithium, for instance. A way to kill his brother and incriminate Connie at the same time."

"But why would he kill his brother?" asked Lombardo. "Why would anybody kill their own brother?"

"Because brothers are supposed to be loyal. Brothers are supposed to support you. Brothers aren't supposed to sell your dream out from underneath you. Did you see the look on Gord's face when we arrested him? Nothing hurts more than when your next-of-kin sells you out."

Betrayal. A murder encapsulated. He took a sip of beer. Tomorrow the equation might be different. The integers might be revenge, greed, or hatred. But the result would be the same. A body somewhere. Gilbert and Lombardo at a crime scene. Cleaning up. Figuring it out.

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Their waitress came to their table. She was in her early twenties. Slim. Pretty. With big blue eyes, rosy cheeks, and curly blond hair, a friendly young woman. Gilbert stared at her. A woman who was taking her first steps in the world, working at the Duke perhaps to earn tuition, or to buy her first car, or maybe to put a down payment on a condo. A young person. Like Gord. Like Terry. Like Connie. Like Tamara.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" she asked.

Gilbert smiled, but it was a sad smile. "Yeah," he said, thinking of what he had told Tamara. "You can stay out of trouble."

Maybe it was something in the way he said it, but her smile disappeared and she looked at him more closely, looked at him in the way Tamara had looked at him, seriously, as if there were some real significance to what he had just said.

"Don't worry," she said, in a mystified tone. "I will."

A few chance words in a bar might make all the difference, he thought. He took another sip of beer. He watched her walk away. Casual advice that might some day prevent her from making a mistake, a warning that might stop her from inadvertantly wrecking the rest of her life. He took a deep breath and felt sadder still. A policeman's words of wisdom, he thought, offered to a young woman he didn't even know. He could only hope.

The rest would be up to her. ●

"The law is a funny thing. From this side of the bars, anyway."

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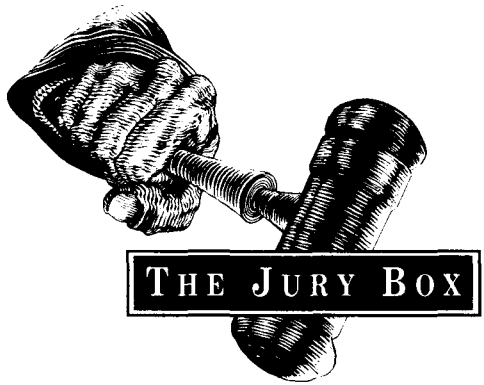

by Jon L. Breen

The late Lawrence Sanders's celebrated Deadly Sin series made it through only four of the seven, some sins being harder than others to build a murder around. Each volume in Lawrence Block's similarly-themed anthology series reprints a number of stories on the sin in question, while Block contributes an original novella, actually a sequence of stories told by a policeman, a priest, a soldier, and a doctor. No doubt this group are manifestly capable of addressing all seven sins entertainingly and provocatively, but finding stories to fill the rest of the volumes may be harder. Beginning with the easy ones, Block has followed *Speaking of Lust* with *Speaking of Greed* (Cumberland House, $24.95), which includes an introduction that fits the theme and will be cheered by anyone who has ever edited an anthology. Of the sins remaining, pride, anger, and envy shouldn't be too hard, either—but can he find enough stories when it comes time for *Speaking of Sloth* and *Speaking of Gluttony?*

Meanwhile, the author's best series character, Matt Scudder, the unlicensed Manhattan private eye and AA advocate now happily married to an arts patron without completely severing his roots in the noirish underside, is featured in a new case.

**** Lawrence Block: *Hope to Die,* Morrow, $25. This series cuts across subgenre lines, appealing to fans of hardboiled fiction, classical detection, and pure suspense thriller. A home invasion robbery of a wealthy couple appears to resolve itself neatly with the bloody deaths of the burglars—but maybe not. Those annoyed by a recent mystery novel trend may carp at the ending, but not at the expert style and sure touch with character and dialogue that got them there.

**** J.G. Ballard: *Super-Cannes,* Picador USA, $24. As Dr. Jane Sinclair takes over her duties

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in Eden-Olympia, a huge, self-contained, technologically and sociologically avant-garde business park on the French Riviera, her husband Paul, recovering from a recent flying accident, tries to discover why her predecessor went on a killing rampage in the otherwise crime-free, security-conscious compound. Presenting a dystopia for the 21st Century, Ballard delivers both a genuine detective story of the rare whydunit type and a penetrating commentary on corporate life in a post-guilt, post-leisure, post-morality society.

**** Ed Gorman: *Save the Last Dance for Me,* Carroll & Graf, $24. The fourth Sam McCain novel involves a rattlesnake-handling church and a pending visit to Black River Falls, Iowa, by Presidential candidate Richard Nixon, one of many powerful friends of lawyer McCain's colorful boss, Judge Anne Esme Whitney. Continuing the nostalgic but clear-eyed picture of period middle America, the series' best to date is even funnier than usual, and offers a stronger mystery plot than some of its predecessors.

*** Anna Gilbert: *A Morning in Eden,* St. Martin's Minotaur, $22.95. In post-World-War-I Britain, young Lorna Kent moves from city to small town and encounters mysterious deaths and the promise of romance. Though modern gothics often keep both villain and hero unknown, the latter is usually easier to spot. Here, though, the reader is kept guessing with no less than four possible love interests for Lorna. The lovely prose style is resolutely old-fashioned, almost Dickensian.

*** Anne Perry: *Southampton Row,* Ballantine, $25. Still menaced by the sinister Inner Circle and powerful enemy Sir Charles Voisey (now standing for Parliament), Scotland Yard's Thomas Pitt dispatches Charlotte and the children safely out of London while investigating the murder of a spiritualist. It's not Perry's very best, but a good whodunit with strong Victorian historical detail and atmosphere.

*** Ron Goulart: *Adam and Eve on a Raft: Mystery Stories,* Crippen & Landru, $17 trade paper, $42 signed limited. Humorist Goulart's 16 stories, 5 about frustrated stand-up comic and dying-message explicator Scrib Merlin, the rest about an unnamed California adman who numbers many murderers and victims among his show-biz acquaintances, all first appeared in *EQMM* or *AHMM* between 1971 and 1986. The plots vary in quality, but not the window dressing: comically named restaurants, unlikely product campaigns, parodic descriptions of movies and TV series. My favorite, "It Was Bad Enough," features an aging comic clearly inspired by Sid Caesar, with hints of Groucho Marx.

** David Peace: *Nineteen Eighty*, Serpent's Tail, $24. The champion of Yorkshire noir follows the James Ellroy model: explicit

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violence and short paragraphs in a four-book cycle (this is the third of the Red Riding Quartet) about quirky fictional cops investigating real-life crimes. The Yorkshire Ripper hunt has its moments of poignancy, but there's not enough originality of plot and people to counterbalance incessant repetitions and pretentious flights of free verse.

The first book publication of Mark Twain's 1876 story *A Murder, A Mystery, and a Marriage* (Norton, $16.95) proves an early example of the no-footprints-in-the-snow brand of impossible crime. Roy Blount's foreword and afterword and Peter de Sève's witty illustrations fill out a small but handsome volume of interest to Twain buffs and mystery scholars.

Anthony Boucher—mystery novelist and short-story writer, science fiction writer and editor, and longtime *New York Times* and *EQMM* critic—was a renaissance man, a multilingual genius who bridged the two cultures of science and humanities and whose interests ranged from opera to football to true crime to poker. Now Francis M. Nevins, the most nearly comparable figure on the current mystery scene, has edited *The Anthony Boucher Chronicles: Reviews and Commentary 1942 to 1947,* Volume I: *As Crime Goes By* (Ramble House, $19.95), a small-sized, dust-jacketed paperback in the format of the same firm's Harry Stephen Keeler reprints and originals. Nevins's 22-page introduction gives a full account of Boucher's life and achievements, while his notes throughout Boucher's crime-fiction columns identify allusions and provide needed context. Two more volumes of Boucher's writings for the *San Francisco Chronicle* are to follow.

Another Boucher project of the mid 1940s was writing the Sherlock Holmes radio program in collaboration with Denis Green. Now 26 of those shows, with Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce as Holmes and Watson, are available in a 13-tape boxed set, *The New Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (Simon & Schuster Audio, $49.95). The broadcasts, previously reissued in pairs at a higher price, come complete with Petri Wine commercials and patriotic appeals to buy bonds, along with fascinating introductory remarks by actor Ben Wright, the widows of the two collaborators, and others with connections to the show. This is radio detection at its best. Though "The Problem of Thor Bridge" and "A Scandal in Bohemia" are among the stories dramatized, most of them are originals spun off from references in the Doyle texts. Many of the plots are enormously clever, and even the weaker ones are notable for their wit, atmosphere, and Sherlockian expertise. One slight complaint: The original dates the programs were aired are not given.

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Art by Allen Davis

GUNFIGHTER'S HONEYMOON

by Edward D. Hoch

Tamia Ponter, whose mother was a Ute Indian, had been acting as Geronimo's translator when Ben Snow met them both in Washington early in 1905. She returned East a few months later and Ben married her in late summer. He told her once that he'd been seduced by the anger in her flashing brown eyes, and perhaps that was part of the truth.

Ben had started a security and protection business in Richmond, Virginia, and it was there that they were married. He was about forty-five years old, the exact year of his birth being a matter of some uncertainty. They honeymooned at Niagara Falls in late August, then took the Buffalo, Rochester & Pittsburgh Railway to Salamanca, where they transferred to an excursion train headed for Ontario Beach in Charlotte, just north of Rochester. It was to be a glorious few days at a beachfront resort and amuse-

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ment park, capping their honeymoon journey. Unfortunately they arrived on the very day of the third murder.

The train from Salamanca deposited Ben Snow and Tamia right at Ontario Beach Park, just a short walk from the Hotel Ontario where they had booked a room. Done in a grand Victorian Queen Anne style, the three-story hotel boasted scores of guest rooms, with a wide upper porch and lower veranda where visitors could relax and admire the lake view. It was the largest and best hotel on the lake, and Ben had been fortunate to obtain an August reservation.

A Rochesterian born and bred, Edward D. Hoch says: "I've virtually never mentioned Rochester in any of my stories, but this new historical is set in 1905 right down at the end of Lake Avenue, which had another name then. It's sad that the great hotels and the amusement park I mention were all long gone by the time I was born." The story is the latest entry in Mr. Hoch's long-running Ben Snow series. ¶

"I love it already," Tamia told him, gazing up at the crowning cupola where gulls swooped in and out of the arched openings. A lawn festooned with flower beds ran down to the boardwalk along the beach. Strollers not on the beach itself were fully dressed, and many of the ladies carried parasols to ward off the sun.

Their room was on the lake side, with access to the upper porch, and they had only just gotten unpacked when Ben walked out for a better view, attracted by a disturbance from below. "There seem to be some police downstairs," he told Tamia.

The dark-haired young woman grinned. "No doubt they've heard that Billy the Kid has checked in."

Early in their relationship Ben told her how he'd sometimes been mistaken for a resurrected Billy the Kid because of his youthful appearance and his fast draw. "I was a gunfighter then," he had admitted. "But it didn't last long."

"How many people did you kill?"

"Only a few, in self-defense. No one who didn't deserve it."

But she liked to tease him about the Billy the Kid rumors, and the people he may or may not have killed. "What about Indians?" she'd ask. "Did you kill any of my mother's people? Any Utes?"

"Not a one!" he swore.

"My husband the gunfighter!"

"Not anymore. I'm in the security business now, remember?"

In fact, Ben had given his business name and address when making their reservation at the Hotel Ontario. As things worked

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out, that proved to be a mistake. On their first evening they feasted on freshly caught Lake Ontario whitefish in the impressive hotel dining room, served by a uniformed, white-gloved waiter named Cedric who had an English accent to go with the name. As they finished their dessert, a slender gray-haired man approached Ben.

"Pardon me, sir," he said. "Are you Mr. Ben Snow of Richmond?"

"That I am. What can I do for you?"

He presented his card. "I'm Ray Waldon, Charlotte's constable. I wonder if I could speak to you about an urgent matter."

"I don't—"

"The room clerk told me you had a security and protection business in Richmond. I'd like to hire your services."

"Sorry," Ben replied with a smile. "I'm on my honeymoon."

The slender man directed his attention to Tamia for the first time. "My best wishes to you both, and I am indeed sorry to interrupt such a festive occasion. But we have a serious situation here. There have been three murders in Charlotte within the past week."

"You must have a police force," Ben said.

"Not enough of one to handle a crime wave. With all the summer visitors here, something like this could shut down our tourist business."

"See if you can help him, Ben," Tamia insisted. "I'll sit out on the veranda for a while and then go up to the room."

"All right," Ben reluctantly agreed.

"A word of caution, Mrs. Snow," the constable added. "Don't go off the veranda after dark. Two of the three victims have been attractive young women."

Constable Waldon's office was a few blocks south of Ontario Beach Park. They left the hotel and walked past the large Circle Swing and Virginia Reel, two rides still attracting customers even in the early evening when electric lights were being turned on. They went through the wide midway that led to the park's arched entrance, beneath tightrope walkers and past bicycle daredevils. Most of the passing men wore straw "skimmers," popular as summer headgear in the East. Ben still wore his cowboy hat and boots, though Tamia was not too happy with either item of apparel.

Once they were in his little office near the lighthouse on the Genesee River, Waldon laid out his written reports for Ben's perusal. "The first victim was Donald Zufall, one week ago today. He was stabbed to death at the park, over near the Government Pier. He and his sister were Charlotte residents. Three days later we found the body of a young woman vacationer, Margaret Young, in the shallow water near your hotel where she was staying. At first we thought it was an accidental drowning, but the Monroe

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County coroner found no water in her lungs, and there were bruises on her throat. It now appears she was strangled."

"I realize Charlotte is a separate village, but it seems to me that the Rochester police could help you in this matter."

Waldon shook his head. "It's a village and county matter. I wouldn't ask the city's help. They've been anxious to annex Charlotte for some time, in order to link the city with Lake Ontario. We're none too happy with the idea. I've called the county sheriff about the latest killing today, and he'll be out here in the morning. But I'd like to have something to give him."

Ben smiled slightly. "To make it look good."

"Well, yes."

"Tell me about this third killing."

"Another woman, Sara Savor or Xavier. She was a waitress at Bartholomay Pavilion, a beer hall across the street from your hotel. They found her in her room. She'd been stabbed, too."

"Which was her name?"

"She went by Savor, but we found letters from her father addressed to Sara Xavier, and a birth certificate with the name Sara Elizabeth Xavier on it."

"There might be no connection between the crimes," Ben said, though he knew there probably was. "I don't know that I could be of much help."

"I can pay your fee out of the village fund," Waldon assured him.

"We'll talk about that later. Tell me something. Is there anyone you've had trouble with lately? Or maybe a local that you sent off to prison? Someone who might have returned recently with a grudge against you?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Just a crazy idea of mine."

"I'd have to think about it," he said. "But this isn't about me."

"Do any of the victims have families here that I could speak with?" Ben asked.

"Only the first one, the man who lived with his sister. The woman who was strangled had been staying alone at the hotel all week. We're still trying to contact her family. The waitress had an apartment alone. I'm contacting her father."

"Give me the sister's name and address. I'll call on her in the morning."

After an early breakfast at the hotel with Tamia, Ben told her he'd be back in an hour and set off to speak with the first victim's sister. Audrey Zufall lived in a small house on Whitney Place, a block west of Ontario Beach Park. She was a middle-aged woman with a pleasant face, though grief over her brother's murder was still apparent in her eyes.

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"He was a good man," she told Ben, mistaking him for a sheriff's investigator. "No one who knew him would want to kill him."

"What was he doing at the park the night he was killed?"

"He'd stroll over there in the evenings sometimes and stop at Bartholomay's beer hall. He worked at their brewery in Rochester. I often went along, but this time I stayed home. If I had gone, he might still be alive."

"Only a few dollars were found on him. Do you think he might have been robbed?"

She shook her head. "No, he never carried much money."

"What about women?" he asked gently. "Your brother had never been married?"

"No. We lived here together since our mother died. He'd take the trolley into the city each morning. He was never late getting home at night. Once in a while he'd take some local woman to a dance, but he had no regular girlfriend. He gave me a diamond ring for my last birthday. If he bought it for someone else, he never told me."

"Did he know either of the two women who were killed this week?"

"I'm certain he didn't know that Margaret Young. She was just visiting here. I don't think he knew the waitress, either, but I suppose he might have seen her at the beer hall."

"Did he ever drink too much, engage in fights?"

"Nothing like that," she assured him, shaking her head. "The brewery employees got all they could drink at work, and he learned to control it early. He was a fine man, a fine brother. He didn't deserve to die like that."

"Thank you, Miss Zufall," Ben said as he left.

"I hope I was some help to you."

"I hope so, too."

Ben headed back toward the lake and then decided to detour to the beer hall. Bartholomay's Pavilion was a three-story structure whose main floor was filled with small tables and bentwood chairs. An open balcony ringed three sides of the beer hall, which was the largest of the structures that made up Bartholomay Park. Next to it was the brewer's Cottage Hotel with a large central building and a series of attached summer cottages. It was not yet noon and the beer hall was nearly empty when Ben entered. A sign on the wall advertised singing waiters every night, but at that moment all he saw was a lone waitress wearing a dress with a close-fitting bodice and full skirt. She was wiping off the tables with a damp cloth in preparation for the noonday crowd.

"Pardon me," he said to the girl, who couldn't have been more than eighteen. "Do you know Sara Xavier?"

"Sara Savor? She's not here anymore. She died."

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"I know that," Ben told her. "I'm working with the police. Who are you?"

"Glenda McPhearson."

"How well did you know Sara?"

She stopped wiping the tables and straightened up to stare at him. Her face had a youthful innocence that had not yet hardened into cynicism. "I guess none of us knew her very well. We didn't even know her real last name until she was dead. She was just Sara to everyone here. We served pretzels together, hot pretzels that we carry on long sticks."

"Did she know Donald Zufall, the man who was killed last week?"

"We all knew Donald. He worked at the brewery. He liked to kid with the girls."

"Did he ever go out with Sara?"

She shook her head. "He was old enough to be her father. The only guy she even mentioned going out with was a man named Sid. They broke up and I never met him."

Ben became aware of a tall, bearded man standing near the bar, observing his conversation with Glenda McPhearson. At first he supposed that the man was her employer or the beer hall's manager, but there was something about him that struck a chord in his memory. Perhaps it was the way he stood with one hip lower than the other. He'd known a gunfighter once—

He cut short his conversation with the young woman and walked over to confront the bearded man. "Don't I know you?" he asked.

"From where?" the man said, his lips curling into an ugly smile even the beard couldn't hide.

"Kansas City, maybe. Or farther west."

"Sure, Billy. I remember you."

"The name is Ben. Ben Snow."

"Still fast with a gun?"

"Faster than you, Dogie."

"Are you carrying?"

Ben held out his arms. "Do I look like I am?"

"What are you doing here? Looking for me?"

"Not especially."

"Seems like we've got some unfinished business."

"That was in another life. Things are different in the East."

Ben turned away and started for the doorway. "You'd better watch your back, Billy," the man called after him.

"The name is Ben."

Tamia was waiting for him at a table on the hotel veranda. "I thought you'd be back sooner."

"Ran into someone I knew out West."

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She seemed to sense the tension in his voice. "That's never good. Tell me about it."

As he began the story of Dogie, Cedric the waiter appeared at their table. "Good day, sir and madam," he said in his clipped British accent. "Will you be lunching with us this noon?"

"I think just some tea," Tamia decided.

"The same for me," Ben agreed. Then, as the waiter jotted down their order, another thought occurred to him. "Cedric, what do you know about the beer hall across the street?"

"They attract a far different clientele than we do, sir," he replied with a touch of snobbishness. "I doubt that you would find it to your liking."

"Do you know any of the employees there?"

"I know some by sight, but I do not socialize with that class."

"What about this woman guest who was strangled, Margaret Young? Did you wait on her here?"

"Not to my knowledge." He retreated to fill their order.

Tamia immediately returned to the previous subject. "Tell me about this man Dogie."

Sensing her concern, Ben was sorry he'd mentioned it. But there was no way out now. "His name is Dogie Glock. He killed a man in Kansas City about twenty years ago. That was when folks still thought I might be Billy the Kid. Dogie sure thought so. He figured he had to kill me, too, to make his reputation. He was fast on the draw, and I knew that if I killed him to prove I was faster, people would be sure that I was Billy. I left town instead of facing him. I think he's still looking to fight me."

"Ben, be sensible. This is twenty years later. The country is a different place now. Even Geronimo marches in parades these days. And there certainly aren't any gunfights here in New York State. If this man Dogie starts anything you can have him arrested."

"The local constable has other things on his mind right now."

"You mean the murders?"

He nodded. "I've been trying to help him. If we don't find the killer there'll be more murders."

"How can you know that?"

"There's a simple pattern to the killings. I'm surprised it didn't occur to the constable." The waiter returned and poured their tea.

"Pattern?" she asked.

"The first victim was named Donald Zufall, the second was Margaret Young, the third was Sara Xavier. Z-Y-X."

His wife's eyes widened. "Only a madman would kill people because of the initial letter of their last names."

"No one said he was sane. And he's not going to stop with X."

"You're doing all this because that constable asked for your help?"

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"I have to," Ben told her. "His name is Ray Waldon."

The pattern of the alphabet murders, as Ben Snow thought of them, had become clear the moment he heard the victims' names. And it occurred to him almost at once that the killer's true target might not have been Donald Zufall or Margaret Young or Sara Xavier at all, but the next letter in the backwards progression. That would be W. Without unduly alarming him, Ben had asked Constable Waldon if there was anyone whom he'd sent to prison that might have returned recently. Perhaps the first three deaths were only a cover for the real intended victim, Ray Waldon. Surely sooner or later one of the investigators on the case, or a member of the press, would have noticed the backwards progression of the victims' final initials. Like Tamia, they would jump to the conclusion that it was an insane killer, never realizing that Waldon had been the prime target all along.

Ben found the constable on the pier near where the first victim had been found. With him was a stocky man in a dark suit and tie who wore a pistol in a western holster barely concealed by his jacket. Ben didn't need to see a badge to know this was the detective from the sheriff's office that Waldon had been expecting.

The constable turned toward Ben as he approached. "This is Deputy Fairbanks. He's been sent out to help me. This is Ben Snow, the security man I told you about."

Fairbanks shook hands, none too gently, and looked him over. "Cowboy, huh? Hat and boots."

"Used to be. I gave it up and moved East with the new century."

A full-masted schooner flying a Canadian flag glided by, entering the river to dock at the long Government Pier where customs officers would meet it. "This is about where we found Zufall's body," the constable said, pointing to a spot where the park gave access to the beginning of the pier.

"Stabbed, you say," the deputy remarked. "But you didn't recover the weapon."

"No. I assumed it had been thrown into the river, until the third victim was stabbed in the same manner."

"Which was?"

"Just under the breastbone, in the direction of the heart."

The deputy's eyes squinted as if he was thinking. "And yet the second victim was strangled." He turned toward Ben. "What does that tell us, Mr. Snow?"

"Well, there are several possibilities."

"Only one that I can see. You're dealing with two different killers here, maybe three. There is no concrete evidence of a series of murders."

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"What about their names?" Ben asked, and explained that the deaths of Zufall, Young, and Xavier might be only the beginning.

Fairbanks scoffed at that. "Craziest thing I've ever heard! You think he's going to kill twenty-six people till he gets back to A?"

"I'm just pointing it out," Ben answered defensively.

Ray Waldon snorted. "I guess if he's looking for a W to kill next, I'm right in line." But there was no humor in his eyes.

Ben wasn't about to be put off. "I think you should draw up a list of Charlotte residents and hotel guests, so we can pinpoint any intended victims."

The constable shook his head. "That would be next to impossible. On a good day we get thousands of visitors here by train and trolley, from the city and as far away as Buffalo and Pennsylvania. Keeping track of them all is impossible."

"The killer would concentrate on employees and residents, not visitors."

"Miss Young was a visitor," Waldon reminded him.

"So she was." And that had been bothering Ben from the start. Was it possible that Fairbanks was correct and there were two or more killers at work? "Do you know anything about a man named Dogie Glock? I ran into him at the beer hall today."

"Glock?" Waldon considered for a moment before answering. "I arrested him once for disorderly conduct. He got in a fight with a Canadian skipper off one of the schooners."

"When was this?"

The constable thought back. "Beginning of summer. Early June, I think."

"What was the fight about?"

"Diamonds, I think. Glock claimed the skipper was supposed to sell him some and found another buyer instead."

"If Glock was involved, it was illegal," Ben guessed. Something was stirring in his memory, something about diamonds that he'd heard only recently. "Was he convicted of anything?"

Waldon shook his head. "I jailed him overnight, but the skipper sailed away before dawn without pressing charges, so I had to release him."

"I'm going looking for him," Ben decided.

Deputy Fairbanks frowned. "I don't think the constable will need your services now that I'm here."

"All right." He left them and headed back toward the beer hall. If Dogie Glock was involved in this, he wasn't about to let go of it so easily.

He found Glenda McPhearson, the barmaid he'd spoken with earlier. She was making the rounds of the tables with her stick of hot

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pretzels, and he asked if she'd seen Glock. "Not since this morning," she answered. "It's a bit early for him."

"I heard about a fight he had with a Canadian skipper. Were you here then?"

"Sure! It was on a Saturday night and the place was crowded. They were arguing about some business deal."

"About diamonds?" he suggested.

"I guess so," she answered with a shrug. "Some of these schooners pull up for customs inspection and while the cargo is being checked the captain is off selling something out of his pocket."

"Did Glock ever sell diamonds?"

"He was trying to get in on the business, but these Canadians have their regular customers."

Ben bought a pretzel from her and bit into the hot, salty dough. It was enough to make anyone want a cold beer. "You're talking about diamond smuggling?"

"Nobody calls it smuggling around here."

He was remembering now, remembering the diamond ring Zufall had given his sister. "Did Donald Zufall buy diamonds?"

"I guess so. He showed me a couple once."

"This fight between Glock and the Canadian—was it with knives?"

She shook her head. "Just fists. The Canadian knocked him down and Glock went for his gun, but that's when the constable arrived to arrest him."

"I understand he was freed the next day."

"The Canadian was gone by then."

"Was Zufall here during the fight?"

"He might have been. I don't remember."

That night Ben and Tamia dined together at their hotel. She ordered a steak and leaned back in the padded chair. "It's good to see you again. For a while this afternoon I was feeling deserted."

"Weren't you down on the beach?"

"It was no fun alone."

"I know. A deputy sheriff has arrived to help Waldon. He may not need me now."

"I hope not."

The meal was delicious, and they were just finishing some ice cream dessert when Cedric hurried in from the kitchen. "Sir, I thought you would want to know. Constable Waldon has just been stabbed outside the hotel."

"I have to go," Ben said, excusing himself once more. "Stay inside, Tamia."

The English waiter led him through the kitchen to the back

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door. There, in the faint glow from nearby electric lights, several people were tending to the man on the ground. Ben joined them, edging his way to the constable's side. Deputy Fairbanks was already kneeling there, trying to stop the bleeding from Waldon's side. "I don't think it's too deep," he said. "A doctor is on the way."

"Did you see who stabbed you?" Ben asked the fallen man.

"No," Waldon managed to reply. "He got me from behind."

"This time he dropped the knife," Fairbanks said, gesturing toward the bloody weapon that lay on the ground. "Don't touch it."

"How did it happen?" Ben wanted to know.

"He thought he saw that fellow Glock over here, going around the back of the hotel. He went to question him and I headed around the other side so he couldn't give us the slip."

"Waldon, was it Glock who stabbed you?" Ben asked him.

The constable was managing to sit up now. "I told you I didn't see anyone. I'm not even sure it was Glock I was following."

"I didn't see anyone coming around the other side," Fairbanks said. He was lifting the knife by its tip without touching the handle. "As soon as I found Ray on the ground I called into the kitchen for help."

"What are you doing with that knife?"

"I want to check it for fingerprints. They claim no two prints are the same. The British have been using fingerprints for identification for four years now, and a great many American cities are following their lead."

A doctor arrived and examined Waldon's side. Deciding it was only a flesh wound, he applied some medication and a bandage, saying he would call on him in the morning. "You're damned lucky," Fairbanks told the constable. "You almost became victim number four."

"Do you believe in the alphabet murders now?" Ben asked.

"I don't know. Is there anyone around here whose last name begins with a V?"

They all looked at each other. One of the hotel cooks ventured the name of a French waiter named Viande, but he'd returned to Paris in July. No one could think of anyone else.

Ben went back to his table and told Tamia what had happened. "I think we should head for home in the morning," she said.

"Not tomorrow. Maybe the next day."

Later, in their room, she noticed him rummaging in the bottom of his Gladstone bag. He took out his revolver, which he'd wrapped in an oily rag. "Did you bring a gun on our honeymoon, Ben?"

"I felt better having it along. After what happened tonight I think I should carry it."

"No!" Her voice was sharp and definite. "If you carry it, you'll use it."

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"You know me better than that. It's for protection only. My protection and yours, too."

"Put it away and come to bed."

"Tamia—"

"There are times when I think you really are Billy the Kid."

The following morning was cloudy, and they could see a late summer storm out over the lake. "Come sit on the porch with me," Tamia urged. She picked up a copy of *Sister Carrie,* which she'd started on their train ride.

"I can't right now. I want to see how Waldon is coming along."

"You really think it was this same alphabet killer who stabbed him?"

"That seems certain."

"Have some breakfast before you go. I'm going to bathe first and then I'll go down."

"All right. I'll be back by noon."

He hurried downstairs before she realized he'd taken the revolver with him.

Ray Waldon was back at his desk when Ben arrived, favoring his right side but otherwise in good condition. "The doc came by first thing this morning," he told Ben. "Said I was a mighty lucky man. If it was your alphabet killer he must have been frightened off by the activity in the hotel kitchen. Their door was partly open."

"Frightened enough to drop his knife. I hope Fairbanks can find some fingerprints on it."

But Waldon shook his head. "No luck there. Fairbanks was here already and said the knife handle was clean, not even a smudge."

"Are you sure it was Glock that you saw?"

"I don't—" He had no chance to finish the sentence. The office door opened and Glenda, the pretzel girl from Bartholomay's, burst in.

"If you're still looking for Dogie Glock he's over at the beer hall now," she told them.

"What's he doing there this early?" Waldon asked, reaching for the holstered revolver on his desk.

"I'll take care of this," Ben insisted. "You're in no shape to go after a gunfighter."

"I just want to question him."

But Ben was out the door, heading down the street toward the beer hall. Already the morning trains were depositing families for the day's outing, and the amusement rides were starting to rumble. When the first echo of thunder rolled in from the lake storm, hardly anyone noticed. Then Ben saw one of the small steamboats that made the journey from Canada docked at the customs station on the river. That could explain Glock's early arrival in the area.

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Before he reached the Government Pier he recognized the bearded gunman among those chatting with the crew. When Glock saw him he started walking away, down the pier. Ben broke into a run to overtake him. "Stay away from me," Glock warned, going for his gun.

Ben leaped forward and collided with Glock at the edge of the pier, hurling them both into the river. There were shouts from the dock as customs officials and others jumped in after them. After some thrashing about in the murky waters Ben was quickly pulled out. As he wiped the water from his eyes he saw Deputy Fairbanks bending over him. "What in hell were you trying to do, Mr. Snow?"

"Glock came here to buy diamonds from one of the Canadians. Check his pockets."

The bearded man was hauled from the river and Fairbanks quickly went through his pockets, retrieving a small tissue-wrapped packet tied with string. He handed it over to a customs agent, who carefully opened it to reveal a half-dozen small diamonds. "Where did you get these?" he asked Glock.

"Bought 'em fair and square."

"We'll see about that." Glock was hustled away to the customs shed, and Ben saw that Constable Waldon had joined them. Fairbanks told him what had happened.

"Is there any connection with the murders?" Waldon wondered.

"I think there might be," Ben said. "But I need to get a change of clothes right now."

He hoped Tamia would be on the beach and miss his return to their room, but luck was against him. As he emptied the damp cartridges from his revolver and replaced them with new ones, she walked in from the porch where she'd been watching the storm over the lake. "What happened to you? Your clothes are soaked!"

"I had an accident."

"With your gun?"

"Tamia—"

"Just tell me," she ordered, and he recognized the flash of anger in her eyes.

"Dogie Glock has been buying smuggled diamonds from the crews of Canadian ships. I tried to grab him and we went into the river together. Somehow this diamond business might be behind the killings." While he talked he stripped off his wet clothes and exchanged them for some dry ones. "The first victim, Donald Zufall, gave a diamond ring to his sister. It seemed unlikely for a brewery worker, and I think he was buying them from the Canadians, too."

"What about your alphabet murders?" Her voice had calmed a bit.

"Perhaps the killer tried to disguise the fact that Zufall was the

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intended victim by following his death with other victims. He might even have included an attack on himself to remove suspicion."

"On himself?" Suddenly she realized what he was saying. "Do you think Constable Waldon is involved?"

"The attack on him was halfhearted at best. And the weapon was left at the scene for the first time. Why? Because he'd stabbed himself and didn't have an opportunity to hide the knife."

"It's a possibility," she admitted.

"I have to get to the bottom of this before Fairbanks decides Glock is the killer and stops looking for anyone else."

"Leave the gun here, Ben."

"I—"

"Leave it. I'm not going to have you killed on our honeymoon."

He tossed it on the bed. "I'll be back."

"Make sure you are. I'm going down for breakfast now."

Ben felt uneasy confronting Waldon with his suspicions when he wasn't armed. The constable could shoot him and make up any number of stories to explain it. Still, Waldon was the man he had to face. He headed back to the Government Pier but the customs people told him Waldon had returned to his office. He found the constable with a balding man in his fifties who was going over a box of woman's clothing.

"This is John Xavier," Waldon explained. "He's the father of Sara Xavier, come for his daughter's possessions."

Ben shook hands with the man. "I'm sorry for what happened, sir. I never knew your daughter but I'm trying to help the police find her killer."

"Nice of you," the man replied. He seemed close to tears as his hands touched her dress. "I'm from Ohio. Sara was happy there. I don't know why she had to come here."

"Did you know any of her friends?"

He shook his head. "She didn't write much."

"You don't know anyone who'd have a motive to kill her?"

"No." His eyes rose to meet Ben's. "I've already answered all these questions."

"Your daughter was known here as Sara Savor. Why did she use that name?"

"Easier to spell, I guess. But it wasn't just that. Her full name was Sara Elizabeth Xavier, and when she was in school the other kids made fun of her because her initials spelled SEX. Kids can be cruel that way. So she started using a simple version of her last name starting with an S."

"She was Savor even to her employer."

He nodded. "She told me there was only one boyfriend who knew

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her real name. I can imagine how that came up, probably one night in bed."

"Who was he?"

"I don't know. She hadn't seen him lately."

John Xavier bundled up his daughter's meager possessions and said goodbye. Ben had few words of comfort for him. When they were alone, Ray Waldon told him, "Fairbanks has taken your friend Glock to the county jail for questioning. Did you want to see me about anything?"

"No," Ben decided. "I had an idea about the murders but I was wrong."

Wrong.

Sara Elizabeth Xavier.

Then he knew the answer.

"I have to get back to the hotel," he told Waldon.

As he hurried through the amusement park, oblivious to the tightrope walker overhead, it was all coming together in his mind. Donald Zufall had been buying smuggled diamonds from the Canadian seamen, and had even given a diamond ring to his sister. He'd been killed for those diamonds, and there'd been a witness to the killing, a hotel guest named Margaret Young. She'd threatened to tell the police, or perhaps even tried to blackmail the killer. He hadn't meant to murder her, too, which was why he strangled her rather than using the knife again.

Somehow, then, it occurred to his twisted mind that he'd killed two people whose last names started with Z and Y. If he could kill someone with a last name starting with X, the police would think it part of an insane pattern. So Sara Xavier had to die. And to make certain the police got the point, he made a halfhearted attempt on Constable Waldon as well.

A group of laughing children ran past him, but Ben focused his attention on the hotel. He left the park on the lake side and crossed the street to the Bartholomay. He could see no sign of Tamia on the beach or the veranda so he went directly to their room. The door was slightly ajar and he entered to find the English waiter, Cedric, serving breakfast to his wife. Tamia sat primly in her chair, a napkin spread across her lap.

"I went downstairs and Cedric suggested that since I was alone I might be more comfortable eating in my room. He brought everything up to me. Isn't that nice of him?"

"Very nice," Ben heard himself say.

"Would you be wanting anything, sir?" the waiter asked.

"Do you have any diamonds for sale?"

"Sir?"

"You killed those people, didn't you, Cedric? To you they were the Z-Y-X murders, but not to anyone else, at least not at first.

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Sara Xavier was Savor to her employer and everyone else. Until she was dead, only an old boyfriend knew her real name was Xavier. The pretzel girl at the beer hall thought she called him Sid, but it was Ced, wasn't it? Short for Cedric. If the murders were linked, only you could have done it because only you knew her real name."

"You are making a great mistake, sir," he told Ben.

"Am I? Why did the killer leave the bloody knife after he stabbed Waldon outside your kitchen last night? And why were there no fingerprints on the handle? I remembered that the waiters all wear white gloves, as you're wearing now. I think you saw Waldon behind the hotel and took the opportunity to slip unnoticed out the open kitchen door and stab him in the side. Knives are easy to find in a kitchen. But you couldn't reenter the place with a bloody knife, or even slip it into a pocket where the blood might soak through. You had to leave it by your victim."

"Even if your reasoning is correct," the waiter said, speaking with proper respect, "I must point out that there were eight waiters on duty last night. All of us were wearing gloves, and any of us might have left the knife beside Mr. Waldon."

"But, Cedric, only you were serving us on the veranda when I told my wife about the alphabet pattern of the killings, and how I feared that Waldon might be next. And only you came up here this morning, probably to see if I'd gotten any of the diamonds from Zufall's sister. And only you have a name that might sound like Sid."

Cedric was still smiling benignly when the knife appeared in his hand and he lunged at Ben. That was when Tamia fired through her napkin, shooting the knife from his hand along with one of his fingers.

Later, after Fairbanks and Waldon had been summoned to take Cedric into custody and Ben was alone with Tamia, he said, "You never told me you were such a crack shot."

"You never asked. Cedric seemed a bit too eager to serve me breakfast in my room, so I hid your pistol under my napkin in case it was needed."

"My wife the gunfighter!"

"Tell me something, Ben," she said, moving closer, "and I promise I'll never ask it again. Are you Billy the Kid?"

He laughed and answered, "No."

"Were you ever Billy the Kid?"

But he was kissing her then, and neither of them spoke. ●

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Art by Mark Evans

THE LAST ROMANTIC

by Raymond Steiber

The calendar on the wall was for October 1962—over a year since the Berlin Wall had gone up—a year of shootings and desperate escapes and silent fear.

Below the calendar the certificates began. Awards for marksmanship with a pistol, mostly East Block, but one of them, at least, an international award. He'd got that one in Finland. Then the photographs: Mölder poised with a pistol while his Russian competitor glowered in the background.

The Russian judges had tried to skew the results in their compatriot's favor, but Mölder had beaten him anyway—cleanly and with a deadly precision.

Mölder hated the Russians. He hated them for what they had done to Berlin at the end of the war—the gang rapes, the looting—but he hated the Americans more. It was their bombs that had killed his family and left Mölder with a lifelong limp.

Get both of them, he thought. But the Americans first.

He poured himself a stiff drink of schnapps. Outside, a dour October rain was falling, and his gimpy leg hurt like hell. The

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schnapps would soften that, but it wouldn't make it go away.

Mölder limped into the light. In photographs he looked imposing, but in person he was a smallish man with stainless-steel fillings in his teeth. He had gimlet eyes and wore steel-rimmed glasses whose lenses, when he moved his head, seemed to flare in the lamplight. On his left temple was a scar like a lightning bolt.

He was a hunter. A killer. That was what his East German masters paid him to be, and he was well satisfied. A colleague had amused himself by pronouncing his name *Mörder*—murderer. Eventually the colleague had disappeared into a prison camp—not his doing—but it didn't bother him, either. Under this regime it didn't pay to have a sense of humor—and an *ironic* sense of humor could be tantamount to a death sentence.

Adventure, romance, espionage, crime: Raymond Steiber mixes them all up in a riveting yarn set in the days of the Cold War, when the Berlin Wall loomed over would-be escapees to the West. The North Carolina author, recently deceased, was one of the very best of *EQMM*'s adventure/suspense writers. We have another of his unpublished stories coming up later this year. Don't miss it!

The telephone rang. He put down his glass and limped over to it. The joints of his leg sent messages of pain up into his groin. Like all killers, he had a solipsistic outlook. *His* pain mattered, and someone needed to pay for it. But the pain of others was noticed only in so far as it was useful to him—in extracting information, for instance.

He picked up the telephone. The voice on the other end whispered to him. He answered in the affirmative. Put down the receiver. Got his hat and raincoat from a peg in the hallway. Then went out into the rain.

He drove a pre-war Mercedes that he had obtained this way and that and kept running with spare parts gotten in the same manner. Better an old German car than an overstuffed Russian Zil such as Mielke and Wolf drove. That was where he was headed through the rainy night—to meet with those two.

A uniformed Vopo (Volkspolizei) saluted and stepped aside as he drove into the inner courtyard of the nondescript building on Landsestrasse. Five minutes later he was entering an office on the third floor. The hulking figure of Markus Wolf was there. He was the head of foreign intelligence, the man who ran all the East German agents in the West. But the office belonged to his master, Erich Mielke, the Minister for Internal Security, and it was he who

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was seated behind the desk.

Mölder let himself down into a chair, being careful of his leg, and Mielke immediately launched into his spiel. With his plastic-rimmed eyeglasses and his widow's peak, and his mouth like a purse, he was the perfect little East German bureaucrat. Obnoxious to his underlings, obsequious to his superiors, including the loathsome Russians who really ran the show.

He told Mölder about the woman. Hannelore Giesler. She worked for Wolf, but now she'd taken up with some American and disappeared.

"She's fallen in love with him," Wolf put in.

"What does it matter what she's done?" Mielke snapped. "She's a danger to the State. She knows the names of some of our key agents in the West. One word from her and they'll be rolled down like ninepins. Oh, I know what you're about to say, Markus. She's loyal. She won't breathe a word. But who knows what she'll do once she's safely in the West?"

"The point is," Wolf said, "that she's not there yet."

"Exactly. Precisely. And your job, Mölder, is to stop her before she gets there."

"Don't hurt her," Wolf started to say.

But Mielke cut in again. "Use any means necessary to reel her in—including the most extreme means. She must *not* reach the West."

A faint smile touched Mölder's lips. He was watching as a stricken look crossed Wolf's face. Wolf was a spymaster, perhaps the greatest the East had produced. His metier was subterfuge and trickery, not murder. To his mind killing would be an admission of defeat. But he was also a committed Communist, and Mölder knew that in the end he'd put the blinders on and raise no further objection.

Mölder remembered something else about Wolf, namely that he was a Jew. He wondered what he'd think if he knew that Mölder had been a member of the Hitler Youth. But that was a fact he wasn't about to divulge.

He leaned forward and whispered, "Tell me more about the *fräulein.*"

And that was exactly what Mielke and Wolf did while the bitter man with the limp listened attentively.

Turn now to Jack Newman with his lopsided grin and his homely-handsome face. Jack the ex-fighter-jockey and maybe the last true romantic in the known universe.

His name had come to the attention of certain officials in West Berlin. They'd heard that he'd crossed over into the Eastern Sector and they were worried that he might be planning to defect. But

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the only plan Jack had in mind was to grab himself an armful of a certain warm *fräulein* and carry her back to the Florida Keys with him.

He'd been a jet fighter pilot in the Korean War and dueled with the Ivans up near the Yalu River. One of them had caught him napping once and shot the hell out of his ship, but he'd nursed the bird home anyway and got a fresh one and went back to return the favor.

He'd had friends all over Korea, not only in the Air Force but in the Marine air arm as well. He knew, and liked, Buzz Aldrin and John Glenn and Ted Williams, the baseball player who'd been called back into service when the North Koreans had invaded. And he'd partied with some of them when he was on R&R in Japan. And as with all fighter-jockeys, the partying generally got pretty wild. If you're looking for staid, upright gentlemen, don't look behind the controls of a fighter plane. The two don't mix.

After the war he got stationed at Ramstein Air Base down near Kaiserslautern. Flying patrols against Ivan again, only this time they both kept their fingers off the firing button.

Then his brother had called from the Keys and told him that their dad had had a stroke and that it was time for him to come back and take charge of one of their charter fishing boats—they had two, and his brother already ran one of them.

Well, he'd always known that was in his future, that this flying business had just been his fun time. And he also knew that by the time it happened, he would've found the woman he wanted to settle down with. And by God, he had found her! And by God if he wasn't going to marry her and take her back with him. There was just the little matter of getting her out of East Germany.

He'd met her at a dance in West Berlin. What he didn't know was that she was a Romeo agent on her first assignment, trolling for a lover who had access to NATO secrets. She'd lobbied Markus Wolf for the job because to an East German, the West was as fabulous as Hollywood was to a Nebraska farm girl.

That was where the action was, the glamour, the excitement. And if the only way to get there was by signing on as a Romeo agent, then she'd do it and close her eyes to the nastier parts of the business.

She'd been given careful instructions. Look for the lonely ones, the ones who are a little fat or have weak chins. Those are the ones who are desperate for a little romance and whom you can reel right in. But instead she'd met Jack Newman, and the lonely ones could just look out for themselves.

Before the evening was over, she was telling him how her father had nicknamed her Mitzi the Gypsy because of her dark, flashing eyes and black hair. And then *he'd* started calling her Mitzi, and

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she'd been, well, thrilled. How could it have happened like that? How could they have immediately locked on the same radar beam? And where had all the cynicism and calculation of a blossoming Mata Hari gone? Out the window apparently, never to be retrieved.

In the end she'd confessed to him not that she was a spy, but that she was an East German. And he'd said: "That's all right. I'm a conch from Key West, Florida."

And she'd said: *"Vas ist das Konk?"*

And he'd replied: "Look into my eyes and you got one cold."

Anyway, after he got the call from his brother, he resigned his commission and decided to make a dogleg into East Berlin to pick up Mitzi—if she'd come with him, and, hell, she'd do that all right. In his cocksure fighter-jockey way, he was certain of it.

And so on a cloudy Saturday afternoon—Berlin must hold the European record for such days—he turned up on her doorstep. And she didn't even know how he'd found her!

"I have my ways," he said.

"Quick! Get inside! Before somebody sees you!"

He didn't hesitate—and as soon as he'd kicked the door shut behind him, he took her in his arms. At first she turned her face away, but then she thought it might be a lot more fun to turn it back again, and that was that.

He released her after a while and put his hands on her shoulders and said: "I'm taking you back to Florida with me. Pack a bag—but don't pack too big a one—and we'll skedaddle. Old photographs and stuff like that would probably be best to take."

She stepped away from him wide-eyed. Her mouth said, "No!" but somehow her mind was saying something else. Then he grinned that lopsided grin at her and she was gone.

She argued awhile anyway, counting the minutes until she could hesitantly nod yes. And that nod seemed to make her knees go weak.

"But how will you get me into the West?"

"I got some names from an intelligence officer I know in West Berlin. Same way I got your address. They're people who'll help us."

"Don't mention their names! Don't even breathe them! I don't want to know! I *can't* know!"

Because then she'd have to pass them on to Markus Wolf. Her entire life's training told her she must.

"Listen, don't worry about that. Just think how you're going to look when you've got a nice Florida tan. With that black hair and them flashing eyes, you'll be the sultriest female in the entire Keys."

"Jack, you're a crazy man!"

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"Crazy in love with you, Mitzi."

And then she was in his arms again, and against her better judgment she began to believe that this madness might just come true.

When Jack approached him, the thin, gray man was feeding pigeons beside a pond. The pigeons looked fatter and happier than most of the East Germans Jack had seen. Maybe that was because they could fly back and forth across the Wall.

The man wore a long black coat and had a woolen scarf around his neck. The brim of a dark green hat was pulled down over his forehead.

Mitzi—Hannelore—had stayed behind beside a bench. She didn't want to be able to identify this man. She didn't want to be in a position to report what he said.

The meeting had been arranged with a cryptic telephone call, and now Jack identified himself and he and the man strolled alongside the pond.

Mitzi watched them. She wondered what she was doing here, but she already knew. It was because Jack made her giddy. He was like the Americans she'd seen in bootleg films. Always ready to act, always ready to *do* something. It was crazy. How could he be so optimistic? Didn't he know any history? And in particular, didn't he know any *European* history?

Beside the pond Jack said: "If you're an informer, I'll break out of whatever jail they put me in and come back here and toss you about thirty feet out into that pond there."

He said it with a grin, but he meant every word of it.

The gray-faced man eyed him without expression.

"In that case," he said, "I'd better not inform on you. I catch cold so easily, you see."

"Just as long as we understand each other. That *fräulein* up there by the bench is just about my entire future and if she gets hurt, somebody else is going to get hurt, too."

"I was in love once myself, *kamerad.*"

"I believe it. You couldn't do what you do if you didn't have that behind you."

"I'll need some money. Not so much for myself, but to make things work."

"I got a pocketful. What do you want? Ostmarks? Deutschemarks? Dollars?"

"A mixture of ostmarks and Deutschemarks would be best, I think."

"Tell me how many."

The man named a sum. It was a lot for him. It would keep him

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and his family in food for several months and do the same for several of his colleagues. But for Jack it was peanuts.

"Take double that. I mean it. Getting Mitzi out of here's worth everything, and that isn't even close."

They got down to business.

"Have you been seen with her? You must know how obviously American you look."

"It couldn't be helped. I'm no good at sneaking around."

"Then you must get better. And you must disappear immediately—both of you—before you're picked up by the Vopos. There are people always on watch, informers in every building and dozens on each block. There are so many of them that they end up informing on each other."

"Well, that's a pisser."

"It's the way this society works. It's why I turned against it, and I was once a supporter. They've turned the place into a prison, and the prisoners themselves into a kind of internal guard."

"What do we do then?"

"There's a place I know where you can hole up for a night. It won't be comfortable, but it won't be a dungeon, either. Then, with luck, tomorrow night we'll move you right out."

"Why haven't you ever gone?"

"That's a game for young dogs, not an old hound like me. Now here's where you must go. . . ."

Jack went back to the bench and told Mitzi what was up.

Her knees quivered. "I don't know if I can do this, Jack."

"It's a big jump, all right. But it's like swimming. Somebody throws you in the lake and you learn pretty quick what you've got to do."

"But this lake is filled with sharks, Jack."

"You let me worry about that."

Mölder took the pistol from its case. It was a long-barreled 9mm automatic. Automatics were notoriously inaccurate, but he'd had his special armorer work on this one till it was balanced like a throwing knife and had a kick no worse than a mother's kiss.

He stripped it and began cleaning it with a lightly oiled cloth. His marksmanship awards looked down on him from the wall. The old windup clock ticked its lonely tick. The radio in the corner played Mozart—not that he paid attention to it. It was just background music. Aural wallpaper.

Mielke probably thought he was at a command post somewhere or tooling purposefully around the city in his aged Mercedes. That was because he didn't fully understand his own system. It was only necessary to wait spiderlike at the heart of a web. The eyes and ears that blanketed East Berlin, that blanketed all East

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Germany, would do his work for him. Sooner or later someone would spot the American—they couldn't help it—an American stood out in this grim, gray place like a brightly plumed parrot. Then the call would come and he would act.

Or maybe one of his ferrets would discover the route they intended to take. Then it would be ringed round with Vopos, with him at one end to take charge of the prisoners.

He'd make them squeal all right. He'd make Hannelore weep and the American go down on his knees. Where was the pleasure in it for this bitter man if he didn't?

He finished cleaning the 9mm automatic and reassembled it. He tested the trigger mechanism. An easy, satisfying click. Then he inserted a fresh eight-round clip and he was ready.

At fifty yards he'd hit anything that moved, and at fifty feet he'd shoot the wings off a fly—that was his boast, anyway. And how much better than a fly was this Hannelore.

Oh, he'd understood Mielke all right. Mielke wanted her dead because alive she'd only cause friction between him and Markus Wolf. And Mielke needed Wolf. Wolf was the essential ingredient in the East German espionage stew.

Dead, she'd be quickly forgotten. And to placate Wolf, Mielke could blame it on Mölder's overzealousness.

But don't blame me too much, Mölder thought. Because then maybe I'll have to arrange a bullet for you, too.

A bullet for everybody in the end.

The clock continued to tick, the radio to play its Mozart.

Then the telephone rang.

The gray-faced man took them to the cellar of an old bombed-out building. There was a mattress down there and some suspicious-looking blankets and the stub of a candle. They'd brought food with them in a string bag—bread and sausages and several bottles of beer. This was where they were going to have to hole up for the next twenty-four hours and neither of them liked it.

The gray-faced man left them there.

Mitzi said: "We'll freeze, Jack."

"It's not that cold. And anyway, if we huddle up, we'll be just fine."

Darkness began to fall, and they sat on the mattress and wrapped themselves up in the blankets and lit the candle.

They ate, Jack throwing the husks from his sandwich into the far corner of the basement.

Mitzi shivered. "Don't. You'll draw rats."

He hadn't thought about rats—something else to give them nightmares when they settled down for the night.

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"Tell me about Key West," she said. *Tell me about anything to get my mind off this place,* she thought.

"It's full of cheap bars and free-spending tourists. The tourists usually end up looking like lobsters from the sun. But the water's so blue you won't believe it. And wait till you see a Key West sunset."

"I'd like to be in one of those cheap bars."

He grinned at her in the wavering candlelight. "Me too, if you want to know the truth."

Later, as they huddled on the mattress, there were rustlings out in the darkness. Mitzi shivered, and Jack clenched his jaw and wished that it would hurry up and get light again.

The next day dragged slowly by. Once Mitzi found herself weeping. She wanted to go back to her snug little apartment. She wanted to get out of all this filth and misery. But she'd jumped over the ditch now and she couldn't jump back.

The gray-faced man returned at dusk.

He crouched beside them in his shabby overcoat.

"This is where you must go." He described the building and what floor to go to and what number to look for on the door.

"Wait till it gets fully dark, then wait an hour after that, then walk there as quickly as you can. It's only six blocks, but you'll have to go cautiously because you'll be approaching the Wall."

"How do we get into West Berlin?" Jack asked.

"The man in the building will tell you everything."

"But you won't tell, will you?"

"It's better this way. If you're captured, you won't be able to tell them how we're managing things."

He left them there in the gloom of the basement. Afterwards the darkness came down quickly. Jack checked the luminous dial of his wristwatch.

"Well, at least we won't have to spend another night in this joint."

"Yes, but where will we spend the night, Jack?"

"In the best hotel in West Berlin. Start thinking about it right now. Start thinking about soaking up to your chin in a bubble bath while room service brings you a bottle of champagne."

"Like one of your movie stars."

"You're my movie star, Mitzi."

The hands of Jack's wristwatch made their slow circuit. Then it was time to move out. They climbed a rough wooden ladder to street level, then paused in the darkness to brush off their clothes. The six-block walk to their destination turned into eight when they made a wrong turn and had to double back. Each time the headlights of a car flashed by, they sank their faces in their coat collars. And once when a Vopo came strolling their way, Jack

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pulled her into a doorway and kissed her. The Vopo shined his flashlight on them and moved on. Maybe Jack wasn't the last true romantic after all.

The building, when they finally reached it, reminded Jack of an old New York tenement. It was six stories high and had two buildings just like it standing beside it.

But the buildings behind it had been dynamited out of existence in order to clear a no man's land alongside the Wall. For a moment they just stood there and stared at the concertina wire with its cruel, razor-sharp barbs. Get caught in that once, Jack thought. Get caught while the border guards peppered you with their rifles.

Mitzi must have been thinking the same thing because she shivered and gripped his arm. They went in the building and up the stairs. On the third floor they stopped to examine door numbers, then knocked as they'd been instructed. Three-one-two.

Nothing happened. Then Jack heard a muted clanking in the room beyond. A moment later the door inched open, and he saw a girl of eight or nine with braces on her legs.

Wrong door, he thought. But then the girl turned and said: "It's them, Papa!"

A man of about forty appeared in the doorway. He wore an old gray sweater with patches on the elbows. He had a pipe in his hand, and from the odor, the tobacco in it was nothing to brag about.

"Inside. *Schnell.*"

They slipped past him. The lodgings beyond consisted of two rooms—a parlor and a small kitchen with a linoleum-covered table. There was no bathroom. Apparently the people on this floor shared a common one.

The man wasted no time.

"There's a matter of money."

Jack handed over the agreed-upon sum.

"Yes. Satisfactory."

"Are you and your daughter the only ones here?"

"You want more? But no, there isn't anyone else. The girl's mother lives in the country with her parents. We only see her at weekends when we go to barter for food." He held up the wad of ostmarks. "This will make it easier for us."

Jack moved to the window. The apartment faced the back, and he could see over the wall into the American sector. A couple of U.S. soldiers were patrolling there, one of them a black corporal. The sight of the black corporal lifted Jack's spirits. He hadn't realized before how characteristic blacks were of America, how much a part of its fabric. It was like a sight of home.

"Don't let yourself be seen," the man said. "The border guards don't like people getting too interested in the Wall."

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Jack turned away from the window. Mitzi had seated herself beside the girl, and the girl was peering up into her face.

"How do we get from here to there?" Jack asked.

"Ah." The man produced a key. "There's an old S-Bahn tunnel from before the war—a subway, you'd call it. It was bombed out during the siege, but a brief section of it survived and runs practically under our feet. About a year ago the Ministry of State Security rediscovered it and opened an entrance. It's a way for them to get agents and spy equipment into the West without being discovered. Also, they sometimes bring people the other way. They've disguised the entrance as a public works project—the kind that never seems to get finished. This key opens the metal gate that leads into the tunnel."

He told them how to get to it.

"When you've unlocked the gate, take the key to a pile of bricks you'll see outside the entrance. One of them has a chalk mark on it and that's where you're to hide it. That way I can retrieve it later. Once you're inside, reach back through the gate and snap the lock in place."

Mitzi spoke up. "Won't there be a guard?"

"No. The place is locked most of the time. They only open it when they need to move people through. What they don't know is that we've been using it for the same purpose. But be careful. Sometimes the border guards check the site."

Jack took the key. "How soon do we get started?"

"Anytime you like. You'll be on your own, of course. If you get caught, get rid of the key. Drop it down your trouser leg. Then it will shake out behind you as they take you away."

Jack hunched his shoulders, then unhunched them to relieve the tension.

"What do you think, Mitzi? Shall we go for it?"

Before she could answer, there was a sound of vehicles pulling up outside.

The man with the pipe went white.

He cracked open the door, listened a moment, then moved into the hallway. Jack followed him while Mitzi sat staring-eyed with her arms around the girl.

They approached a window at the end of the hall. It faced the street, and down below a truck had pulled up and a bunch of Vopos were pouring out of it. Two of them had dogs on leashes—alert-looking Alsatians with jaws full of eager teeth.

Another vehicle had stopped beside the truck—an old but well-kept Mercedes. A Hitler car, Jack thought. A Vopo got out of the passenger seat. Then a smallish civilian in hat and raincoat slid from behind the wheel. The civilian began to give rapid-fire orders.

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The man with the pipe muttered: *"Mein Gott."*

Jack grabbed him by the shoulder. "Is there another way out of here?"

"Up over the roof, then over the next roof, then down the stairs of the third building—if they don't cover it. But they aren't spreading out. They're coming directly here. Yes, that's the way. You and the *fräulein*—go as quickly as you can."

"What about you and the girl?"

"We stay. Without you two they've got nothing. They won't even have the key! They'll manhandle me a little bit—there's no getting around that—and maybe I'll spend a night in the lockup, but that should be the worst of it."

They hurried back to the apartment. They could hear the Vopos entering the lower hallway.

Mitzi came to her feet.

"Come on," Jack said, "we're getting out of here."

The Vopos were pounding up the stairs. They slipped off their shoes and headed upward. Behind them the door to the apartment clicked shut.

Mitzi was terrified. Jack had his hand on her wrist and he could feel her pulse jumping. He wasn't feeling too well himself, and as for saying anything to calm her, it simply stuck in his throat.

They hurried upward. Three stories and then the roof. Their stockinged feet made no noise on the risers that wasn't covered by the thundering boots of the Vopos below.

They came to the door that led to the roof. It was jammed or maybe locked. Jack grabbed the handle and lifted it bodily upward and heaved with his shoulder. The door came open. They plunged onto the roof and turned in the wrong direction and found themselves looking down on the vehicles below.

The smallish civilian was just entering the building. He seemed to glance upward, and they stepped hastily back from the parapet.

They went back across the roof and slid over onto the next one. Then they crossed that roof. There was a five- or six-foot gap between it and the next building. Jack leaped first. Then he turned and held out his arms for Mitzi.

She hesitated. Then closed her eyes and jumped. He grabbed her and they both went over backwards in a Laurel-and-Hardy pratfall. Any other time it might have brought laughter to their lips, but now they could only gasp and scramble to their feet and look for a way down to the street.

The Vopo backhanded the man with the pipe. He went spiraling to the floor with a smear of blood showing on his lips.

The Vopo leaned down to give him some more. Mölder watched expressionlessly with his hands in his pockets.

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"That won't work," he said.

"I think it will," the Vopo replied.

"Then you're a fool. Karlheinz here has no reason to talk to us. No *incentive.* Isn't that right, Karlheinz?"

Karlheinz wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his sweater and said nothing.

Mölder said: "We could beat you all evening, couldn't we? With no result."

No answer from Karlheinz.

"But suppose we tried something else."

Mölder's hand came out of his pocket holding the 9mm automatic. Karlheinz's eyes widened.

"You wouldn't—"

"Shoot you? Of course not. How would you talk to us then?"

He sidled to his right. His left hand fell and grabbed the arm of the girl with the leg braces and jerked her roughly to her feet.

"Leave her alone," Karlheinz gasped. "She's had polio."

"All the more reason to be tired of this life."

He placed the barrel of the pistol against the side of her head. The terrified girl tried to jerk away, but he only pressed it more firmly.

Mölder's eyes found Karlheinz's.

"I jacked a round into the chamber before I came up the steps. The pistol's cocked. It would only take a squeeze of the trigger."

"Your masters wouldn't tolerate it! No, not even them."

"An unfortunate accident. She moved into the line of fire as you tried to escape. It happens all the time."

Karlheinz broke then. He broke all the way.

"They've gone up over the roof. They're using the old S-Bahn tunnel to cross into the West."

Mölder withdrew the pistol from the girl's head. He hadn't even thumbed off the safety. That was how sure he'd been of getting a result.

The girl ran clumsily across the room and threw herself in her father's arms. She was sobbing, and Karlheinz looked as if he might start crying, too.

Mölder turned to the Vopo. "Quickly—assemble the rest of our people. We can cut them off before they get to the West."

And as he descended the steps he knew exactly how he was going to do it.

They were inside the entrance to the tunnel now. Jack reached back through the bars of the gate and snapped the padlock back in place. If nothing else, it would delay any pursuit. All at once he remembered that he'd forgotten to hide the key under the chalk-

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marked brick. Too late now—there was no way back. And no way forward, either, since the tunnel ahead of them was pitch dark.

Mitzi said: "Didn't the man say something about a switch?"

Jack didn't think so, but they fumbled along the wall anyway, and by great good luck found one. A string of lightbulbs came on, receding down the tunnel. The electrical wire that fed them had been fastened high up on one of the walls.

They were in a kind of entryway shored with stout timbers. Moisture from yesterday's rain dripped unpleasantly from the roof and ran in tiny rivulets down the walls.

They started forward, and the entryway bore left and entered the S-Bahn tunnel proper. Rusted tracks ran off into the distance, and there were puddles of dirty water on the floor. Here and there portions of the ceiling and walls had collapsed, but not enough to block the way. In the worst places, the new proprietors had wedged supporting timbers into place.

"Couple of hundred yards of this," Jack said, "and then we look for a way out."

"Maybe there isn't any. Maybe we'll be trapped in here forever."

"You're the most godawful pessimist, Mitzi. Look how far we've got already."

"Yes, and look where we spent last night and how close we came to being caught by the Vopos."

There was a sudden rattle at the gate behind. Jack muttered an expletive. He'd expected more time before the Vopos caught on to where they'd gone. That guy with the pipe must have ratted on them right away. Well, what did he expect? The man had a crippled daughter to take care of, and under the same circumstances he probably would've done the same thing.

"Let's vamoose," he said.

"I don't know that word."

"Get the hell out of here."

"I'm right behind you, Jack."

They hurried down the middle of the S-Bahn tunnel while behind them the Vopos began working on the gate with a pry bar.

Mölder had split off from the Vopos. He knew another way into the S-Bahn—a kiosk with a winding metal staircase that took you down into a service tunnel. That was how the main tunnel had been discovered in the first place. Some maintenance workers had wondered what the kiosk was doing there. But the service tunnel proved to be so dilapidated and dangerous that the Ministry of State Security had decided to make an entrance of its own.

He climbed out of the Mercedes on his gimpy leg. Some fool had left the kiosk unlocked. Lucky for him—now he wouldn't have to waste time smashing it open. He'd brought a flashlight from the

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car. The dim circle of its beam took him down the twisting metal steps. Below, a part of the roof had collapsed, leaving only the narrowest of openings. Well, he was small. He could squeeze through, gimpy leg or no gimpy leg. Then, with any luck, he'd be ahead of the fleeing pair, and they'd be caught between him and the Vopos.

He smeared his raincoat with filth squeezing through, lost his hat, and had to reach awkwardly back and retrieve it. Then he was past the worst of it and could see where the service tunnel joined the main tunnel. Lights showed in the tunnel. Either the Vopos had switched them on or the American and Hannelore. He started forward, and just as he did the two of them hurried past the place where the tunnels joined—the *fräulein* and the American.

He stepped quickly into the main tunnel. His hand went to the pocket of his raincoat and came out gripping the 9mm automatic. The two of them were splashing through a puddle fifty feet ahead of him. His arm came up and the sight of the pistol centered on the back of the American's head. Then a faint smile touched his lips, and he shifted it to the man's left arm.

He fired. The man spun halfway around with a curse. Hannelore—Mitzi—stared at her lover in shock.

The American looked back and saw the single figure behind them.

"Keep going," he yelled.

Then he gave Mitzi a shove and grabbed his arm and stumbled along behind her.

During all this, Mölder didn't move. Nor did the little smile leave his lips. Two unarmed civilians, he thought. Ducks in a barrel. Stacked bottles at a fun fair.

The pistol came up again. Now it centered on the American's right leg. He squeezed the trigger so gently that the platform of his hand didn't budge the tiniest fraction. The echo of the shot rang down the tunnel, and the American screamed in pain and fell sideways. He made a grab at the cable that supported the light bulbs. Tried to use it to keep himself upright. But he only succeeded in bringing it down with him and smashing several of the bulbs.

The woman turned, bent low, tried to help him up. The pistol rose again, and Mölder shot her squarely through the shoulder. He could see the blossom of red on her coat as she fell. Now he'd downed both of them, and he could do with them what he wanted. But he'd better hurry because behind him he could hear the Vopos finally breaking through the gate.

They were hard men. Cruel. But they wouldn't stand by while he killed these two. They'd want to take them into custody and interrogate them. Well, too bad. Mielke wanted them dead, *he* wanted them dead, and that was the way things would work

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themselves out.

He proceeded down the tunnel. The woman was trying to raise herself up. He let her see the automatic.

"Stille," he whispered.

She sank back down, staring at him. Then he was standing over the two of them, oblivious to the puddle which was ruining his shoes. The American watched him, still gripping the cable, his fingers locked on it, in fact.

Mölder spoke to him. "Which should I kill first? You or the woman? The woman, I think. Then you'll have to watch."

He swung the pistol in her direction, and that was when Jack lunged forward and jammed the socket of one of the broken bulbs into the barrel.

Threaten my Mitzi, will you?

A shuddering 220-volt surge ran through the pistol and up Mölder's right arm into his body. He jerked puppetlike this way and that. His eyes rolled up. There was a smell of burning flesh. Then the round in the chamber of the pistol exploded, wrecking it and spewing hot metal and pulping his hand.

He collapsed in the puddle. The ruined pistol splashed down beside him. He ceased moving, nor did it look as if he would ever move again.

They could hear the Vopos coming. They could hear their dogs. Mitzi got her good arm around Jack, and with an effort that seemed to take forever hauled him to his feet. He put weight on his shot-up right leg and almost passed out from the pain.

She put her arm around his waist, and they stumbled down the tunnel. Every time Jack's right leg touched something he gave an agonized grunt of pain. Mitzi was groaning, too. Mölder's last shot had broken her collarbone, and the ends seemed to be grinding together. But Jack was in worse shape. Jack was barely staying afloat.

She looked back and saw the flashlights of the Vopos. She wanted to scream, *No! What do you want with us anyway? Go back to your firesides and leave us alone!*

Then she saw the rusted metal ladder up ahead, rising up one wall toward a hole in the ceiling. The American zone—they must be under it by now, and the ladder was a way out.

The flashlight beams bounced crazily behind them as the Vopos picked up their pace. They'd spotted them now, and they were gaining on them. Somehow she reached the ladder. She climbed up first, trying to pull Jack up behind her. He used his good leg, his good arm, to help her as much as he could.

The Vopos came on. She reached the top of the ladder and there was a firmly wedged manhole cover there. She strained against it, but with the use of only one hand it was useless, impossible. She

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screamed in frustration and beat against it.

Then all at once it scraped aside and there was a black face above her. Strong hands reached down and pulled her out onto the street. Like that, like she weighed nothing. Then the black man's companion—in uniform like he was—went down three steps and got Jack.

One of the Vopos came scrambling up the ladder. What sort of idiot plan he had in mind was impossible to tell. Maybe he intended to grab one of them by the leg and drag them back into the depths. He probably thought he'd get a medal, but then the black corporal kicked the manhole cover back in place, and his only reward was a couple of mashed fingers.

It was a week later, and they were finally ensconced in that luxury hotel Jack had promised her. And tomorrow they'd be flying to Frankfurt Main Airport and on to New York and then finally to Florida and Key West.

Jack was seated in an easy chair with his leg up on a footstool. The leg was encased in a thick plaster cast that had been signed by their rescuers and half the staff of the hospital where they'd ended up. In addition, his left arm was heavily bandaged and rested in a sling. Even so, he was pretty content. And when Mitzi, who had a shoulder cast of her own, walked too close to his chair she found out why—because that was when he circled her waist with his good arm.

He said: "I've been waiting all week to get my hands on you."

"Jack, you *dummer,* you'll hurt yourself."

But he pulled her down on his lap anyway.

"Ouch!"

"I warned you."

"Wait a minute."

"Watch my shoulder, Jack."

"Ouch!"

"Ooch!"

"Wait. Let's try this."

"Umm. Much better, Jack."

"And how about this?"

"Better still."

And soon their ouches turned to purrs. ●

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The Bat House

by Ray Nayler

He was out building on the bat house again. Aunt Jane could hear the tapping of the hammer, the creak of the ladder. He'd hired workmen to sink the two thick wooden posts, twenty feet high, not ten feet from the cottage. Aunt Jane had seen the plans, days ago, spread out on the crooked cottage table.

"What's all this, William?" She had wanted the table for her crafts, but first-come, first-serve was the rule at the summer cottage. Aunt Jane knew from years of experience that she could get him to move the plans and give up the table by asking question after question until he was sick of it.

Ray Nayler was born in Quebec, Canada, and raised in California. In addition to his 2001 story for *EQMM*, "Saturday Night Special," he has had stories published in a number of literary magazines, including the *Onionhead Literary Quarterly* and the *Berkeley Fiction Review*. He makes his home in Santa Cruz, but is currently in Toronto doing research for his first suspense novel.

He smiled up at her wetly—his thick lips were always wet somehow. He poked a finger at his ear and turned up his clumsy hearing aid.

"Some sort of birdhouse?" She raised her voice now. Even when William was a gawky boy, he'd had the hearing aid, like a spider in his ear.

"It's a bat house." He blinked at her and went back to his plans.

Aunt Jane went out to get some sun down at the beach, but her head was swimming and the black flies were biting that day, putting her in a foul mood. A bat house. She felt cold in the hot sun. And maybe a hundred could live in it, by the massive look of the schematics. Swooping and darting around the cottage, flapping invisible leathery wings in the night. Slapping down perversely into her face when she went for evening walks. Snapping and biting at her. They would all get rabies; they would all get the plague.

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Down the beach was Jackie, her young body slick with the lake's water, the neon scraps of swimsuit like bright drops of sun. At nineteen, she looked just like her great-aunt Jane. And Jane loved to look at her, slapping water at some dark-shouldered boy in the lake's slow breakers. She'll get old someday, thought Jane. She'll be seventy-seven someday, her skin will hang off her one day, but not this summer. What did Jackie think about this business of bats? But Jane saw her and disgusting William later that night, their heads together over the plans, Jackie's long sand-colored legs parted neat as scissors beneath the table. Jane wove sailor-knot bracelets in the living room, without the benefit of her crafts table, and listened to their lowered voices talking about the disgusting winged mice. Moths tapped listlessly at the patio screens. The bracelets would not come out right. Jane went to bed and lay in the dark a long time. Which would be her last summer at the cottage? This? The next? Five more? A night wind hissed in the trees and sent their leaves scuttling across the roof. Besides these sounds she could hear the feeble thumping of her own heart, the slow rush of blood in her ears, a sudden delighted laugh from Jackie that was like a slap in her face. There might be a bat in the room. She turned the light on and sat at the edge of her bed awhile, staring about her into the high, dark corners of the ceiling, looking for the thing.

The next day the workmen came and sank the poles. She crunched on her English muffin and watched them pour in the cement. Jackie walked past with a Pop-Tart and Jane said, "Leave it to William to dream up something like this."

Jackie grinned. "I know. Isn't he something?" The screen door smacked behind her.

William stood outside with his fists on his hips, watching the rising of the poles, examining the cement occasionally, and grinning like an idiot at the workmen. Well, he would think it was something, Jane said to herself. Poor adopted William, whose real father had died when he was three. Everyone had always tiptoed around him, the bright, ugly, sensitive boy, still pasty in mid August. Now he was thirty-five, and still a boy, working in some dusty bookstore and painting awful oils that somehow got acclaim from critics, but never sold. William came to the cottage every summer, even after his adopted parents, his only link to the family, passed away. Somehow he felt he still had the right. Other, better relatives couldn't make it—they held down jobs, they bought houses, they had responsibilities. William, who was not really one of them—not a Davidson, not by blood—came every summer without fail. Even this year, when only three of them came, and it felt sometimes, on the colder nights, as if the cottage itself was dying, board by board. Down on the beach Jane could see the bright

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flecks of Jackie's swimsuit against the green water, the wet brown coil of her hair as she slid into the surf.

She went down to the beach herself, carrying her little beach chair, her copy of Agatha Christie's *Ten Little Indians,* and her wide-brimmed sun hat. She stepped carefully down the long, mossy staircase that plunged steeply down the hill to the lakeshore. She went barefoot. It was a mark of pride. Only renters wore shoes, only renters carried flashlights after dark. The owners knew their way around without sight when the sun was gone. And they knew where to step in the daylight, without an inch of rubber between them and the ground.

There was a slight breeze on the beach, keeping the flies away. With the sun on her face, Aunt Jane began to feel much better. After all, he probably wouldn't finish the thing. He had always left things unfinished—half-strung lanyards, abandoned monkey's-paw necklaces—even a marriage to some dull, rail-thin woman that had ended in divorce after six months. No, the bat house would never be completed, and one summer they would cut down the poles, or someone would put a birdhouse in its place. She licked her fingers and turned the pages of her book. Jackie came by, kissed her on the forehead, and put a sandwich in her lap. Jackie always made her lunch. She could be counted on to bring it, every day.

That night they were at it again, looking over his plans. Jane went down to her friend Mary's cabin, and they played mah-jongg until late in the night, but Jane's mind was not really in it and she lost badly, even as East Wind and with her own season. When she came back to the cottage, climbing the mossy stairs in the dark, she was quiet. She did not know what made her do it. She'd had a glass of red wine, and she was warm and fuzzy-headed with it. She opened the screen door a quarter inch at a time and padded silently through the cottage.

William and Jackie were on the glider, her long legs across his, their lips together. Jane could hear the soft sounds of their kissing, the sliding of William's hand across the cotton of Jackie's shirt, the small tapping of a white moth on the patio screen. William's hearing aid was on the table, his hand underneath Jackie's shirt. Jane could almost feel it, leathery, whispery, on her own skin. Silently she walked back through the cottage, watching the exploring dart of Jackie's tongue across those lips. She would have to go outside and come back in again, letting the door slap to warn them of her. She inched it open and walked out into the dark. Her face hit something, hard, and she stumbled, almost falling. It was one of the posts for the bat house. She put a hand to her head, but there was no blood. There was wet, but that was tears, colorless and shiny in the dark. She wiped her eyes and mounted the steps

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again, letting the screen door fall closed behind her with a solid *smack!*

They were at the table, of course, and Jackie smiled at her and asked about the mah-jongg game.

"Are you all right, Aunt Jane?" asked William. She could see it there, in his eyes—a flicker of guilt, of resentment. He had always disliked her. Because she had never sidestepped his insecurities or pampered him. Now he could show it. Still, he was too soft, too weak, to let it come out into the open. But it was there, nonetheless. Jane could see it like heat in his watery eyes.

"How's Mary?"

"Mary's fine," said Jane. And she excused herself to go to bed, with a look at Jackie, whose excited chest still rose and fell too quickly. Jane lay in the dark of her room and tried to sort out the sounds that fell around her, listening for the human sounds, a whisper, a shoe hitting the floor. But the whole cottage creaked as if to fool her, and the waves on the lake whispered constantly, and a pine cone dropped with a thump on the cottage roof.

That night she dreamed of them. There were hundreds of them, huge, leathery, and they carried her up and flew with her, up into the rafters, out into the dark through a gaping hole in the suddenly rotting cottage, out over the black lake, where they played a game, dropping and catching her between them, flying high up with her old and sagging body, dropping her in the dark until she thought she would plunge down forever, through the air, into the dark and bone-filled water. Then another of them would snap her up in its sharp fingers—and swing her into the stars. She woke feverish and burning in the middle of the night, a scream at her lips that did not quite come out.

Something had to be done. She could not let it happen, that was all. Already they were out there, waiting for her. She pulled her robe on in the dark, turned the light on. The wind had come swirling from the lakeshore, around the cottage in the dark, loud in the trees, rushing along the ground. And inside she could hear laughter, William and Jackie laughing to each other. Maybe as early as tomorrow it would go up. She could not sleep, and in the early dawn light she took her chair and crept quietly down the gray beach. Far off down the beach was the nuclear power plant, floodlit like a small sun, cooling towers steaming, water steaming where the superheated waste was dumped into the lake. They had built it thirty years ago, under heavy protest from all the families at the park. Now, in the early dawn, the fishing boats anchored off the steaming plant and tossed their lines into the warm water. The small fish were attracted to the warm wastewater, and the big fish were attracted to the small fish. She sat on the beach and waited for her fever to drop, watched the early runners. Maybe

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Jackie would come, would worry and bring her breakfast. But Jackie did not come. The sun came up, fingering its light over the hill, sliding its light down the beach to the breakers. She knew that Jackie was in bed with William now, but she would not return to the cabin and see Jackie, see herself, defiled. Long after the sun came up, Jackie came down onto the beach in a black one-piece suit that hid her taut belly, like a shroud over her slender body. She splashed into the lake without seeing Jane.

Jane folded her chair neatly and went back to the cottage.

He was out building on the bat house again, high up on the creaking ladder with the hammer in his hand. It was a big, ugly box, and looked almost finished now. Jane squinted up the ladder into the sun.

"Is it almost finished, William?"

"No. The most important part is the paint, you have to paint it the right color, or they won't live in it. There's a chart. You see, it depends on the average temperature, and . . ."

He didn't finish. Jane had pushed the ladder and now he was sprawled on the ground, gasping, unable to catch his breath. His wide, watery eyes stared at the sky blindly. His arms paddled in the dirt. Jane picked up the hammer and, holding it in both hands, brought it down on his ugly head. She did not think she had hit him hard enough, but then she saw that there was a dent where it had hit, and a small line of red came down his face like a crack, and he was not moving although dull choking noises came from his soft mouth. Jane took him by the arms and pulled him to the top of the staircase, and rolled him over. He went down, rolling and bouncing, stopping on the landing, dirty and still. Jane was out of breath. So much work for an old woman! She felt light-headed, but somehow alert. She picked the ladder up and set it against the poles. His hearing aid lay in the dirt. She tossed it down the stairs after him, not looking at the body. Then she plucked the hammer up and took it inside. She washed it in the sink, although there did not seem to be any blood on it. She took the hammer back outside and set it on the ground, at the bottom of the ladder.

From the patio of the cottage she could see Jackie, far below on the bright beach, her swimsuit like a black sunspot against the hard white of sand and breakers. There were a couple of boys in the waves with her, dark-skinned and light-haired. As it should be, as it was.

She rolled up the plans and cleared her craft table. There was shouting from outside, and she knew that someone had found him. Well, this would be a sad summer. But there had been sad summers at the cottage before, and there was always the next June, the next opening of the doors. ●

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LIFELINE

by Peter Usher

EQMM knows very little about Peter Usher beyond the fact that he is a British producer and director. In his debut story for us he takes up a refreshingly different theme, and treats it without a wasted word. With quick shifts of time and scene, the story manages to condense the history of a dangerous and beguiling relationship into a few short pages, with never a lag in the suspense. †

Angus Lane didn't enjoy coming home to a dark, empty house, but that wasn't the worst of it. Each night, as he got inside and fumbled for the light switch, he'd feel mail beneath his feet.

There would be gaudy circulars inviting him to buy anything from double-glazing to pizza, and sometimes the gas company or phone people sent bills.

His name and address were always laser-printed on the envelopes—it was cold, impersonal post. Angus could kid his colleagues, and sometimes even himself, that he was doing okay, holding it all together. But each night the letters and flyers lying in wait for him on the floor ruthlessly nailed the lie.

He was forty-two years old and lived alone, but it wasn't meant to be that way. He'd wanted children—at least two, maybe three—but that dream was smothered the day a grim-faced doctor told his wife she was suffering from ovarian cancer.

Some types of cancer are nervous visitors that hover between staying and leaving. Marie's wasn't like that. It made itself right at home and no doctor was going to evict it.

For a while after her death, nothing seemed real. Grief overshadowed everything. Angus was offered compassionate leave but turned it down. It wasn't that his job was exciting, nor was he ambitious. He was simply afraid that if he took the leave, he might never leave the house again.

Monday to Friday, Grover Technology was his impetus to eat, shave, wash his clothes, double-lock the front door, and go out into the world.

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At lunchtimes, he went to the same sandwich shop in the town centre to have the same meal. As soon as the assistants saw him through the window, one would start to prepare his tuna and cheese baguette while another poured a cappuccino and cut a slice of carrot cake.

Amateur psychologists might suggest he rigidly controlled this element of his life in response to the tragedy that had been beyond his means to influence. Then again, Angus may just have liked tuna.

He usually took a table in the far corner of the cafe. Occasionally someone would ask to take the seat opposite, and then he'd give a curt nod and return to his newspaper.

The day he met her, the cafe was packed and noisy. She didn't ask if the seat was free but sat down anyway.

He glanced up, but only for a moment. Her beauty was unsettling. She had blond hair, cut short, that perfectly framed her face. Silver crosses decorated her earlobes. She had big eyes and broad, sensual lips. He had no idea what her body was like because she wore a large, white raincoat, but that face . . .

Angus made a renewed effort to concentrate on the paper, but picked out only random words that collectively made no sense. He risked another glance, and this time noticed her eyes were green. She was hauling shopping bags under the table so other customers wouldn't trip over them.

"Busy in here today." The words shocked him—he'd had no intention of speaking. Now what? His new companion rewarded him with a generous smile. "I was so relieved to get a seat. I've been on a bit of a spree today," she said, nodding at the carrier bags. "Retail therapy."

Angus laughed—too loud and for too long. As his laughter died away, he fumbled for something else to say, but the conversational tank was empty. He returned to the paper, wondering about her age. She was his junior, for sure, but probably not by too much. Not really.

Her voice cut through his thoughts.

"I'm Alice, but most people call me Ali."

She was holding out her hand. He shook it quickly, conscious that his palm was sticky while hers was cool. "Angus," he said.

"I hate eating lunch with strangers," Ali smiled, "don't you?"

Sipping her coffee, she looked out of the window. All too quickly, she was standing and reaching for her bags.

"Have a good day," she said. Covertly, Angus watched her pay and walk away. In a way, he was relieved to see her go—it was so long since he'd been so tongue-tied and on edge. Yet he felt as if a crucial test had been failed.

Impulsively he snatched up his paper and ran for the door. "I'll

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pay you tomorrow," he called, startling the girl on the till. Other customers were staring but he didn't care. His heart hammered. He felt alive.

Even though the street was busy, it took Angus no time to close in on Ali. He had no idea what he was going to do or say, but trusted to inspiration.

Ali looked puzzled when she saw him. "I saw you heading for the car park and just wondered if you needed a hand with those bags. If you are going to the car park, that is."

"I was, actually." She handed over the bags and they walked together. Eventually she halted beside a two-seater Mazda in British Racing Green. "This is me," she said, opening the boot.

Ali thanked him as she unlocked the driver's door.

Angus spoke her name and she looked back enquiringly. "I was just wondering if you'd like to have a drink sometime. Just as friends, you know?"

"I don't think that's a terribly good idea." She frowned.

"It's only a drink. Conversation. I might throw in a packet of crisps. We needn't take out insurance or anything, it's really not dangerous."

"You don't know the half of it, Angus. I like you, you're a nice guy, but—it's difficult. Complicated."

Angus took a diary from his pocket and tore a page out. "Look, I'll write down my numbers, home and work, just in case things become . . . simpler."

"You really are a nice guy," she said, almost in wonder. She put the scrap of paper into her purse and smiled. "Maybe see you then. . . ."

Over the next week, Angus was a man obsessed. He hurried to work hoping to find a message from her. At lunchtimes he sped to the cafe because she might be there. And at night, he raced home, certain the light would be blinking on his answering machine.

He'd pretty much given up on her when the telephone did ring. He looked at the clock. No one rang him at home this late. No one rang him, period.

"Hi, it's Ali. I don't know if you remember me but . . ."

Angus had to suppress laughter. She'd put him through the wringer and now she was asking if he remembered her. Crazy.

He asked her how she was—not so good, Ali admitted.

"You know that offer of a drink—does it still stand?" she asked.

He heard her take a deep breath as he said it did. "I shouldn't be doing this—it could cause trouble. But I have to talk to someone." She sighed again. "It might even be dangerous for you to see me, so if you have any doubts, just say goodbye, put the phone down."

"I want to see you."

They agreed to meet the next night, and Angus suggested a bar

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in the town centre. Ali said she'd prefer a remote pub in the country. Angus said fine. Whatever.

In the morning, Angus agonised over his outfit for the date. Clothes lay strewn across the bed. Finally he chose his newest suit. Even though he was late for work, he sat and picked up Marie's photograph, stroking the glass with a fingertip.

She was smiling and happy in the picture, oblivious to the cancer inside her. Suddenly he felt guilty. Treacherous. He shook his head, as if to clear it. It had been two years since he'd buried Marie. He put the photo back on the bedside table. "It's just a drink," he said.

Somehow The Fox and Grapes had avoided being taken over by one of the big brewery chains—possibly because few people knew it existed—escaping the indignity of a chrome and neon overhaul.

There was no sign for it from the road. But if it took your fancy to bump a quarter of a mile along a potholed track, then The Fox waited at the end of it.

Inside, the ceiling was low, the bar scarred, and the curtains stained yellow by nicotine. No fruit machines or video games, just a cluster of tables and stools and two booths at the end of the room.

The landlord and two old men, drinking at separate tables, stared at Angus when he walked in. Their expressions conveyed no hostility, just curiosity. He was early, having planned it that way, and ordered a drink to calm his nerves. He had almost finished and there was no sign of Ali. He looked at his watch: She was half an hour late. The other drinkers seemed comfortable, alone with their pints, but Angus felt self-conscious. Where was she?

Ten minutes later, everyone looked as Ali walked in. Hurrying over, she apologised and kissed Angus quickly on the cheek. He went to the bar to buy her a glass of wine, and artfully watched as she slipped off her coat. The simple blue dress she was wearing didn't come close to disguising her voluptuous figure.

Angus told himself that this was just a friendly drink, but he knew that was a lie. In the privacy of one of the booths, their initial awkwardness melted away. Ali was full of questions and Angus found himself talking about his job, childhood, and, finally, Marie.

A good listener, Ali covered his hand with hers as Angus described her death and his grief. He felt a stab of guilt over talking about one woman while being so acutely conscious of another. But Ali's touch felt good. Felt really good.

Getting her to open up was another matter entirely. Whenever he probed, she deflected his questions. Finally, forced to bluntness,

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he recalled their telephone conversation and asked why it was dangerous to see her.

"Would you get me another glass of wine first?" Ali drank nearly half of it before sharing her story: "I'm married, but I expect you guessed that. My husband, well, he's a very violent man. There's something wrong with him, up here," she said, tapping her forehead.

"Once he ground a broken glass into a man's face just for looking at me in a bar. The poor guy needed more than forty stitches. By the time we got home, Keith, my husband, he was laughing about it. He's hurt me, too, hit me and that. Bastard."

"Why are you still with him?"

"He says if I ever leave, run away, he'll hunt me down and kill me. Lots of men make that kind of threat, I know. But they'd never follow it through. Keith's different. He would."

Worry lines abruptly formed on Ali's face, making her look older and more vulnerable. Angus tried to make his next question sound casual, but failed utterly. Tensely he asked: "Where does he think you are tonight?"

"He's in prison, doing time for armed robbery. That's why I was so upset last night, had to talk to someone. He's got a parole hearing coming up. They could let him go. . . ."

Tears came quickly, and Angus soothed Ali as best he could, cradling her to his chest. In a small, muffled voice, she said: "He got eight years and made me promise to wait for him. Said his mates would look after me, meaning they'd spy on me, make sure I didn't go off with anyone. That's why town's a no-go. I just don't know what to do. . . ."

She drew away and tried to smile. "I'm okay now, really." Angus bought more drinks. "Some date this is, eh?" she joked wanly, rubbing mascara-smudged eyes. But he just smiled. It was the best night he'd had in ages.

Before they left the pub, Angus asked to see her again. "Are you mad?" Ali was startled.

"Maybe."

She needed to think about it, and vowed to call him in a few days. He was putting a TV dinner for one in the microwave when the phone rang.

"I'd like to see you again, but I will understand if you don't think we should," she said. They arranged another evening at The Fox, and he punched the air in delight on putting the phone down.

That night, sleep evaded him. His stomach was churning, partly in excitement, but there was another element, too.

Fear. It had renewed power when Ali wasn't close enough to touch. . . .

He wondered what her husband might look like. He'd have pow-

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erful, tattooed arms and a thick neck. His head would be shaved and his eyes small and cold. Prison wouldn't be a problem, because he'd never be another man's prey.

But that wasn't the worst of this notional enemy. What made Keith so dangerous was his temper. When it flared, people got hurt. And it could ignite in a heartbeat. Thank God he was safely behind bars. But what would happen when he got out? Angus pushed the thought away.

After all, he had a strategy. Be careful. Be very careful.

Angus wondered if any rumours had filtered back to Keith. Were there whispers, even now, of a new man on the scene? Maybe Keith was also awake, lying on a hard bunk devising a world of pain for the trespasser. Angus shivered and a voice in his head piped up. A woman's voice. It sounded like Marie. "Is she really worth the risk?"

"Yes," he said aloud, and lay with eyes shut, yet sleepless, for a long time.

Over the next few weeks, Angus became an expert in clandestine meetings. Ali didn't mention her violent husband, for which, ashamed of cowardice, he was thankful.

One night, as they stood in a car park saying goodnight, he pulled her to him and kissed her. Ali was unresponsive for a moment, alarming him—*you've made a terrible mistake*—but then she kissed him back.

Though her lips parted, inviting exploration, she suddenly pulled away, shaking her head. "If anyone sees us . . ."

He looked around. They had been the last to leave the pub and their cars were the only ones left in the parking lot. "Don't go all paranoid on me."

Ali's tone was raw-edged. "We can't be too paranoid, believe me."

"Let's get in my car, then—just for a few minutes."

She hesitated, weighing up the invitation. Then nodded.

Inside, they smiled at one another, neither quite sure what to do, until Angus leaned across for another kiss. Ignoring the brake lever digging into his side, he parted her coat with his hand to find her breast. It felt exactly as he had imagined, soft and heavy. He pulled her jumper away from her skirt to make an entrance and slipped his hand inside.

Now he could feel her nipple through the lacy fabric of her bra. Abruptly she pushed him away, saying: "I'm sorry, I really must go."

He sighed theatrically as she rearranged her clothes.

"See you soon," she said, giving him a peck on the cheek.

"You know it's dangerous driving with an erection," he said.

She laughed. "Not if you drive slowly. Goodnight."

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❖ ❖ ❖

Their relationship had an enormous impact on Angus's life. It made him care about himself again. He became more gregarious, worked harder, and even won a promotion.

But it was also a source of intense frustration. Dates with Ali were always fun. He made her laugh by playing the clown and more important, perhaps, he *listened* to her. Ali seemed surprised—and pleased—by the attention. Emotionally they grew closer, but physically there was no progression from the car park rebuffs, making him feel like a middle-aged teenager.

The need for secrecy was also a barrier between Angus and everything he desired.

He invited Ali to his home, but she argued that was too dangerous. She wouldn't go to the cinema for the same reason. He was forbidden to talk to anyone about their relationship. She wouldn't give him her phone number or reveal where she lived.

Ali made the rules and he obeyed them, every one. It was driving him mad. So one evening, when they'd had drinks, kissed, and said goodbye, he secretly followed her home.

She drove fast, and although it was dark, he didn't dare turn on his headlights. When he felt his wheels sliding into a ditch, he'd wrench the wheel to find the road again. He was certain he'd be spotted, but it probably didn't enter her mind that he'd defy her.

The trail led to a large, detached house on an estate of mock-Georgian houses. It seemed a secure enough place, but she'd left lights on inside, to deter burglars, anyway. Angus watched her unlock the front door and hurry in. Suddenly his plan seemed not only juvenile but a betrayal. He should just creep away and she'd never know about it. No harm done. But he pressed the bell and chimes sounded.

Horrified to find him on her doorstep, Ali gasped: "Go away—you can't come here. Someone will see you." Heedless, he pushed past her into the house.

It was a tidy but unremarkable home. "I can't stand this," he said, "knowing hardly anything about you. I just wanted to see where you lived."

"This is crazy. If anyone sees you here . . . Please, you must go."

He walked over to a tall bookcase. "Lawrence Block, Elmore Leonard—I didn't know you liked thrillers. See—I just want to get to know you better."

She grabbed his arm, towing him to the door. "Just because we don't talk about Keith, it doesn't mean it's safe. I take a risk, a big risk, every time I see you. I do it because, well, I want to be with you. But if you're going to pull stuff like this . . ."

Shaking her head, Ali looked at him with a blend of compassion and anger. "I know it's hard on you, but I thought you understood."

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The threat of losing her broke Angus's resolve. "Okay, okay, I'll go. I'm in the wrong, I'm sorry."

She opened the door just wide enough to let him out into the night, closing it before he could ask when they would meet again.

Two weeks passed, but she didn't call. He toyed with the idea of going back to the house, but that would only make things worse. It was a miserable ordeal. He was convinced he'd lost her.

And then she rang.

During his exile, Angus had decided never to mention his frustration again. She was too precious to lose; he'd simply enjoy whatever she could give him. They met at The Fox. He was overly cheery, she tense and withdrawn. He assumed she was still angry, but midway through the evening, she sprang to her feet, took his hand, and led him outside.

They got into her sports car and she drove fast, continually checking her mirror to confirm that they weren't being followed. She made a sharp turn onto a muddy track and drove into the heart of the forest. After a mile, she killed the engine and got out. He joined her. She walked further into the woods and he followed. They didn't say a word.

In a dense grove of trees, Ali stopped. "Do you want me?"

Incredulous, he mumbled: "Here?"

By way of answer, she began undoing her shirt. She undressed without coyness, as if she was alone in her bedroom. Then she held out her arms to him. In her embrace, time and place were irrelevant. Waves of touch, taste, and sensation broke over him and he happily drowned in them. She gently pulled him to the forest floor and their bodies fused on a bed of leaves. It was passionate, primal, and over too quickly.

For a few moments afterwards, they cuddled in the darkness. But then Ali's mood changed and she stood up, frantically brushing dirt from her skirt and coat. He watched closely, hoping to imprint this moment, this vision, on his mind forever.

She dropped him at the pub and sped away. He was still sitting in his car when the landlord locked up for the night. Still smiling.

Two nights later, he was about to go to bed when the doorbell rang. It was Ali and she'd been crying.

"He's won parole. He's coming out."

Of course, Angus had known this would happen. They couldn't keep Keith locked away forever. In fact, he'd thought about it a lot and had a plan.

Even so, he was nervous: If Ali didn't accept his scheme, he'd never see her again.

"Listen, I've got money. I haven't spent much of the life-insurance

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money I got after Marie died. Never felt the need. Don't you see? It's vanishing money. He won't find us. Really he won't. Please come with me."

She chewed her lip, and the answer, when it came, was simple and somehow anticlimactic. "Okay."

They settled on Mexico for the first stage of their flight. It took Angus a week to make all the arrangements. Accounts were closed and final transactions executed. The last detail was where they'd meet to make their getaway.

"I know it sounds crazy, but will you meet me in the woods? You know, our wood. I can hide my car there, it buys us more time," she said.

When Angus arrived, his headlights washed the forest clearing and he smiled when he saw Ali waiting for him. The last doubt evaporated from his mind. Even in the harsh light, she looked beautiful.

He hurried to Ali's side and hugged her. "I can't believe we're doing this, can't believe I'm doing this."

More practical, she asked: "Where's the money?"

"In the car. We're all set."

She pulled away just as something hard dug into his neck . . . the barrel of a gun. The shock took his breath away. "You didn't really think she'd go off with an old bloke like you?" a voice said cruelly.

As quickly as it had arrived, Angus's fear dissipated. He felt totally calm, and it puzzled him. Not even the feel of the gun, grinding against flesh, disturbed him. And then he understood. Life was only precious while Ali seemed attainable, and this was clearly not the case anymore. She had set him up and betrayed him. Maybe he'd never had a chance with her, but it didn't matter. She'd brought him back to life anyway.

Angus twisted his head to get a better look at the gunman. He was short, with ginger hair and a face that seemed too small for eyes, nose, and mouth. All those wasted nights worrying about Keith, the phantom in his mind. . . .

The gunman, stung by the half-smile on Angus's face, taunted him by saying: "Didn't you ever wonder why she wouldn't have sex with you?"

Ali flinched, fear in her eyes, and Angus knew that in her own way, she had felt something for him after all. They had a shared secret, and still he felt protective towards her. He said nothing as the voice behind the gun jabbered on.

"You did have us worried, mind, that night you turned up at the house. Had to hide in the frigging bathroom. But you never had a clue, swallowed it all.

"And you didn't tell anyone about Ali, like a good boy. So there's nothing to connect us to you."

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Angus closed his eyes and an image of the woman he loved materialised in his mind. She was smiling and he smiled back.

Ali cowered at the crack of the gunshot. "Come on, let's get the money," said the killer. But Ali stayed where she was, staring down at the body in the leaves, her face unreadable.

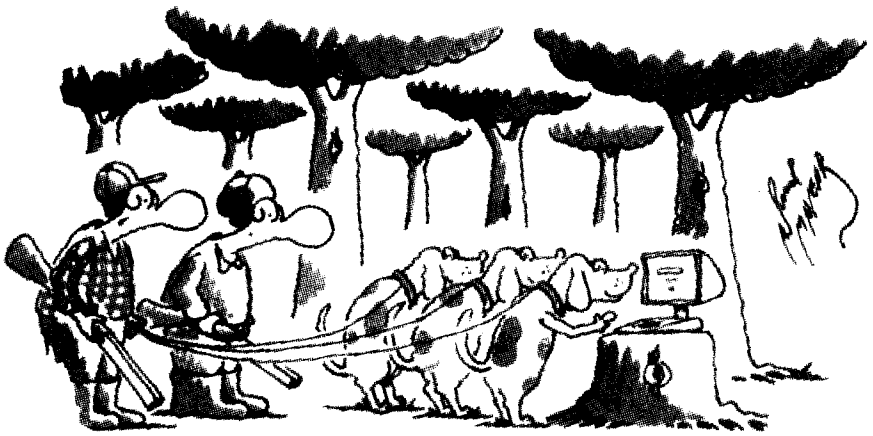
It was a cold London day and widower James Reynolds hunched into his winter coat. The bus windows were misty with condensation. He felt someone sit next to him and glanced across. His new companion was quite beautiful.

Her blond hair was cut short and perfectly framed her face. She had big eyes and broad, sensual lips. But there was something else there, too. He rubbed the window with his sleeve and looked out on the grimy city.

Something else, but what? Got it. There was just a hint of cruelty in that face.

"Dreadful day, isn't it?"

"Awful," he replied, turning to her. She smiled and his heart quickened. Thoughts of cruelty evaporated. He was lost. ●



"When did they start using a search engine?"

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Art by Laurie Harden

HEROICS

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

He had gotten it all wrong.

His body no longer worked the way he wanted it to. He had always ignored that, thinking his heroes could survive anything. *He* could survive anything.

Sobel lay facedown in a pile of leaves, the smell of decaying vegetation rich in his nostrils. The ground was cold and damp, the chill seeping through his flannel shirt and the knees of his jeans. His feet were twisted awkwardly, but he felt no pain there, nothing except the throbbing in his arm, trapped beneath him like a wounded animal.

He rolled on his good side, felt his arm flop against his stomach, and the agony, so sharp that the world went white for a moment. The shove had sent him over the embankment, down the hill. He remembered soaring, swearing, thinking of Sarah, alone up there with them—and then the ground rushing toward him. He put his arms out to brace himself, to break the fall, underestimating both his own weight and the speed at which he'd been dropping. He'd heard the snap—snaps—three at least—and then the pain that

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blotted out the urgency, the fear, the anger.

He thought of pushing himself up, imagined climbing the embankment like Jackson Ross, his fictional alter ego, and saving Sarah. Jackson would have gotten up immediately, would have used the broken limb to pull himself up the hill despite the pain.

Sobel had no idea how long he had been un- or semiconscious. Long enough for them to climb down the hill, check him for dead, and leave, presumably with Sarah in tow. Why would they want her? An innocent three-year-old with eyes as big as the world. Not his, not yet. Not legally, anyway. The adoption papers were ready and would be signed before he married JoAnn.

Only rarely does a single author receive Edgar Allan Poe award nominations in more than one category in a single year, but last year, Kristine Kathryn Rusch found herself so honored: Her *EQMM* story "Spinning" (July 2000) appeared on the best-of-the-year list of the short story committee while a novel she wrote under the pseudonym Kris Nelscott, *A Dangerous Road* (St. Martin's), made the novel committee's list. ¶

JoAnn, who was in New York, spending a couple thousand dollars of his fortune to buy a wedding dress so secret that he couldn't even be in the same city with her. She had left Sarah with him.

For safekeeping.

He pushed himself into a sitting position and felt his closed Swiss Army knife press against his left thigh. For a moment that was the only sensation, and then he realized he was dizzy. The blood staining the leaves, the way his breath came shallowly, the clammy feel of his skin all added to his queasiness. He touched his face, felt stickiness, knew that was where the blood was coming from. Cuts, bruises. He probably had them all over. He was in shock, no doubt about it. He was in shock and he probably wasn't thinking clearly.

But to stay here was wrong.

He braced himself with his good hand and got to his feet, swaying slightly. The air smelled of smoke—fall in Oregon—and the sky was dark gray. It was probably going to start raining soon.

He sighed and looked up the embankment. Steep, even with two hands. There was no easy path. He would have to climb.

The embankment was wet, too, the ground soft. He stuck his right foot into the dirt experimentally, found that it gave easily. He could create his own stairs. Water seeped into his leather shoes, but he didn't care. He had to get up to the car. Once he was there, he would figure out what to do.

Right foot, left foot, right hand clawing the mud. The movements

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slightly uncoordinated. He hadn't realized how much the use of his other arm added to his balance. It bobbed against his side, a long, aching morass that sometimes became sharp and stabbing if the arm bounced too hard.

They had caught him off guard. Two cars, one following closely from Grand Ronde, the other crossing the line in the Van Duzer Corridor, forcing him to either drive off the road or hit the oncoming car. He'd been trapped by the hill on one side and the embankment on the other, the narrow road curving ahead of him and behind. There was a small shoulder—the only measure of safety—and he took it without thinking.

He'd locked the doors and speed-dialed the hands-free phone on the dash, keeping the car running. They'd boxed him in, behind and in front, leaving him no room to turn on the narrow highway, no escape.

Is this a game, Max? Sarah asked, her little voice quivering. Even she had known something was wrong, strapped into the child seat in the back, watching the men approach.

At the last minute, he'd decided to hit the cars—they were all stopped and it would be easy. His airbag would deploy, but he'd deal with it. He had to.

As he shoved the car into reverse—a mistake, he knew now, because they had seen the lights—the men who had gotten out of the car behind him shot out his tires. The explosions echoed in the afternoon stillness, making Sarah scream.

The 911 operator answered right at that point, and he was trying to drive even with the shot-out tires, trying to talk to her, trying to keep the car between him and the men walking toward it. Sarah was crying, and he couldn't see a mile-marker. He didn't know exactly where he was, and the stupid operator was trying to figure out jurisdiction of all things, when he and Sarah might have been shot.

Then they got to the door and used the keyless entry to unlock the door. It shouldn't have worked, but it did, making the little *click-click* as the locks rose. The smallest man opened the rear passenger door and pulled Sarah out, car seat and all.

"Noooo!" Max had shouted, reaching for her, then he felt cold air as his door opened. A gun pressed against the back of his head.

Foot, hand, foot. He was nearly to the top. A diesel truck went by, rumbling the road. Didn't anyone see his shot-up car? Hadn't anyone thought to stop, get out, and help?

He pulled himself up, saw the reassuring dark blue of his Lexus, and found himself wishing he had a new one, with the on-board guidance system. He would have been pinpointed then. They would have found him quickly and easily.

But despite the Hollywood money, and the increased book sales

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thanks to three successful Jackson Ross movies, Sobel had still been fiscally conservative. He'd seen no reason to buy a new car when the old one was paid off and worked just fine.

How was he supposed to know that it was going to be important?

The car looked as wounded as he felt, leaning awkwardly on its shot-out tires. The doors were closed, although he remembered leaving his open, and there was no trace of Sarah inside.

His stomach churned. Why would they take her? Had they followed him from Portland? He'd spent the night after taking JoAnn to the airport, done a bit of research at Powell's Bookstore, and left Sarah with a close friend who often babysat for them. He didn't notice anyone following him after he picked Sarah up. When they had lunch, he saw nothing out of the ordinary in the restaurant, although he wasn't sure how he would have noticed. Coping with a three-year-old who was determined to get pie first took most of his energies.

This didn't seem random. And that scared him more than anything.

He reached the car and peered inside, saw the stuffed dog he'd bought Sarah days ago, felt his heart twist. How she looked at him. How she trusted him.

God knew what they were doing with her. Doing *to* her.

And why.

His briefcase was still in the back. He pulled open the back driver's-side door, reached in, felt his left arm sway, prayed it wouldn't hit anything. Fingers brushed against the edge of the door, but he was getting used to the pain. Or maybe he was numb. Blessedly numb.

He opened the briefcase, saw his laptop, his business papers, his extra credit card. And his cell phone. His pager. How strange. They should have taken everything, shot out the hands-free phone, the ignition, made sure he was stranded.

But they hadn't.

He picked up the cell, speed-dialed 911, identified himself as the man who had called before. He probably should have just spoken to the hands-free. He wondered if the men had even bothered to disable it.

"Stay there, sir," the dispatcher said. "The county sheriff and an ambulance will be there momentarily."

How, he wondered, when they didn't know where "there" was? He supposed it didn't matter. The highway was the only way through the corridor. They probably figured they'd stumble on him soon enough.

"They took Sarah." His voice sounded thick and muzzy to his own ears.

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"Are you injured, sir?" Apparently the dispatcher had picked up on that. Maybe he sounded worse that he thought he was.

"Broken arm, I think. But Sarah—"

"Sarah is . . . ?"

"My daughter. Nearly. I'm adopting her. I just got the papers." Not relevant. He usually was relevant when he spoke. *Focus. Focus.*

"How old is she?"

"Three."

The dispatcher was keeping him talking until help arrived. His brain was working slowly, but it was working. He stared at the tire tracks on the gravel, at the road. No other cars had passed. Just the few he'd heard, marring the oil path. . . .

Oil path. From the gravel. He tracked it, saw a variegated puddle exactly where the back car had been parked. It had been leaking oil.

". . . sir? Are you all right?"

Apparently she'd been talking to him. He hadn't even heard.

"Wait," he said. "I see something."

"Something?"

He left the line open and walked beside the trail, realizing almost too late that he had gone onto the highway without looking. *Focus.* He had to focus. If he wasn't clear, he wouldn't be of any help.

Why was the oil trail crossing the road horizontally? It headed straight toward the hill. It didn't make an obvious U-turn.

"Sir?" The tiny voice of the dispatcher sounded panicked.

"Just a minute," he said.

He followed the trail to the south face of the hill, onto the gravel shoulder, where the oil became black rock. A wide U-turn then. He felt a deep disappointment combined with slight wooziness.

This time, going back to his car, he would be cautious. He walked to the edge of the curve, looked east, saw no cars.

And no oil trail.

"Sir?"

He didn't answer. He was spinning, looking for the oil. It had to be here. It had to be—

The road was almost invisible, cutting through the trees. It looked like a path, overgrown and neglected, but it was wide enough for cars. Trees and shrubs grew over the road, but some of the branches were broken. He jogged toward them, then quit almost immediately as the pain in his bobbing arm made him gasp.

"Sir?"

The oil was there, black and familiar, like a trail of bread crumbs. *Follow me. Follow me.*

"Sir?" The poor dispatcher sounded panicked now. Funny, he

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should be the one who was panicked, but he felt strangely calm. "Sir? If you're there—"

"I found something," he said. "One of the cars was leaking oil. It went up a side road just near my car. On the other side of the highway. I'm going to follow it."

"No, sir. Stay there. When the sheriff arrives—"

"It might be too late. Sarah's alone with them. She's only three. I'm heading up. I'm bringing the phone." As if that made it better. He wasn't sure what he could do. But he couldn't leave her up there alone, those wide brown eyes scanning for him, pudgy hands waving, demanding.

If she was alive.

He closed his eyes, swayed again. Water. He was probably dehydrated. He went back to his car, put on the flashers so that the cops wouldn't miss him, and then reached into his briefcase and made a small map pointing the way to that road. He didn't trust anything to fate, not this time. Not with Sarah at stake.

A truck roared by, spattering him with dust and gravel. Exhaust fumes floated past him, adding to his dizziness. He reached across the backseat, grabbed the bottle of water he'd hardly touched on the drive, worked the cap off with his good hand, and drank. The water was warm, but it tasted wonderful, better than water ever had before. He made himself drink all of it, and as he did, his gaze fell on one of JoAnn's scarves, crumpled under the seat.

He let out a little sigh. It would help, that scarf. It wasn't as good as a gun, but it was something. He pried the scarf free, its silk edge feeling fragile beneath his fingertips. But silk was a strong fiber, right? He seemed to remember that from his reading. Silk was one of those miracle fibers.

He hoped.

With his teeth and his good hand, he managed to tie a knot in the scarf. Then he struggled to get it over his head. That was harder than he'd imagined—the little jolts of pain making him gasp. Once the sling was on, sliding his arm into place was even more difficult. At one point, he had to lean against the car and force himself to breathe evenly to keep from passing out.

When it was done, though, he felt an odd relief. His shoulder wasn't supporting the dead weight anymore. Now his back and neck were. And his arm felt halfway decent in this position. Maybe he would make it after all.

He turned, looked at the road, the oil trail. Then he crossed the highway, patted his right jeans pocket, and felt the weight of the cell phone. He didn't remember putting it inside, but it was there, bobbing against his thigh. His security. His link to the outside world. He reached the side road and slipped through the opening in the trees.

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The road had once been covered with gravel, but most of it had worn away with time and traffic. He suspected this had been a logging road. Now that the trees had been cleared, no one used it anymore.

There were weeds in the middle of the path, bent and broken by the passage of at least one vehicle. The oil trail coated a few of them, still saying, *Follow me. Follow me.*

He did follow, keeping to the side of the road so that he didn't disturb the oil trail. He wanted the police to be able to follow it.

He had never been off the main highway. It was quieter here, different, light filtering through the trees, the smell of pine and loam. There was a damp scent, as if the ground never dried completely, a reminder that this part of the state was rainforest in the purest sense of the term.

The road twisted around a second-growth tree, tall and stately, towering above him like a beacon. There was a rock in the center of the path—more of a boulder really—and he stopped to inspect it.

Something metal had scraped against it, not once but twice, and there was black goo along the side. More oil. The rock was pointed on one edge. Cars had been this way, driving over the rock, figuring they could clear it.

He wondered if the scrapes had caused damage to one of the cars' underbellies—if what he was taking for an oil leak was something else, something that would incapacitate a car quicker than the *drip-drip-drip* of the oil pan.

That was when he realized he needed a plan.

He couldn't go in guns blazing. He wouldn't have been able to attack even if he'd had both arms. He was a middle-aged man, about thirty pounds overweight and out of shape, a man who'd spent the last twenty years sitting on his ass, typing comfortably, making up adventures that he had never—could never—experience. He'd fought as a boy, but only defensively, arms up as the school bullies pounded him for their own perverse joy.

He'd won one of those fights, kicking, jabbing, connecting accidentally, fighting dirty, giving up fighting fair. No one fought fair and won.

No one.

He'd have to grab her, bring her back down this trail, and they'd be after him. They'd have their cars, and their guns, and their confidence, and he'd have a broken arm and a little girl who was scared out of her mind.

He stopped at the next corner. He had no idea how far he'd gone. All he saw up ahead was dappled sunlight and more trees. Something rustled in the grass near him—a small sound. A bird, maybe, or a squirrel. Nothing threatening.

Something was different.

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It took him a moment to figure out what it was. Stumps. Stumps buried in the underbrush, moss and ferns growing on top of the old, perfect cuts. Stumps everywhere, and beside them, willowy trees at least twenty years old.

He had been right. This was an old logging road, unused since the early eighties, gravel gone to storms and rain. Forgotten by everyone except the handful of people who'd worked it.

He felt a thin excitement. The road would only go as far as the stumps. The loggers had no reason to go deeper into the forest than that. Now he had a destination. The end of the road. He'd go to the end of the road and turn around.

Sobel rounded a corner and saw the cars.

Three cars—the two that had boxed him in and one other, a black SUV, new, and parked to the side.

The getaway car.

Why hadn't they left yet? What were they waiting for? His stomach churned. What if the third car wasn't a getaway car at all, but belonged to someone else—reinforcements, someone as tough as the others?

He didn't see anyone near the cars, but they had to be somewhere. He took one more step forward and saw the cabin. That word was too grand for the dilapidated building, but he didn't know what else to call it. "Shack" implied something smaller. This had once been someone's home, but it had fallen into disrepair. The roof was half off, the porch was crooked, and the stairs leading up to it were missing.

Sarah had to be inside.

He needed to get to her, but first he had to make sure their rescuers could find them.

He backed down the road quietly, going around the corner, praying that no one had seen him. His arm throbbed; he could feel his heartbeat echo in the wound.

He went halfway down, near the beginning of the stumps, where he believed no one could hear him, and pulled out his cell phone, flipping it open.

The line to the left of the tiny screen, the line which showed him how good the reception was, was barely visible. Great. He'd have to go down to the highway to get good reception—and that would be a waste of time, not to mention a serious drain on his energy.

He dialed 911 anyway, hoping he'd get through, wondering if the new dispatcher would know about him as well. If he didn't get through, he'd go down to the road, but he'd risk it here, now, and then he'd go back to the cars.

By then, he'd have a plan.

"Nine-one-one," a female voice said, and then got lost in static.

He identified himself, hoping she could hear him, hoping she

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knew who he was and what his situation was. He should have left the line open, but he hadn't wanted voices to come through, hadn't wanted any unusual noise as he hurried through the trees.

A voice mingled in the static, something about staying by the car. Good. She knew who he was, then, knew what he was about.

He told her, quickly and as loudly as he dared, about going up the logging road and finding the building and the cars.

"Excellent." Suddenly her voice was as clear as if she were beside him. "Now return to the highway, Mr. Sobel. Our officers are nearly there."

"No," he said. "I haven't seen Sarah yet. I have to find her."

"Let us do that, Mr. Sobel. You could get—" Her voice disappeared in a crackle of static, and he used that moment to sever the connection. He dropped the phone back in his pocket and felt it bump against the fabric, slamming against his thigh like the Swiss Army knife had earlier.

His breath caught in his throat as the plan came to him. He reached across, fumbling in his left pocket with his right hand, cursing softly as his forearm knocked against the sling, jostling it.

At least the pain had eased. Keeping the arm elevated made it less of a liability.

His fingers found his Swiss Army knife and pulled it out of his pocket. He did owe this moment to Jackson Ross, and mentally he saluted his character. Since Sobel had come up with Ross, he'd carried a Swiss Army knife.

A man has to be prepared for anything, he used to have Ross say.

He pushed open the blade and looked at it. Shiny with lack of use, it looked sharp and impressive.

The bird had stopped twittering. He wondered if that meant it had noticed him or it had seen someone else.

As he rounded the now-familiar corner, he let out the breath he hadn't known he'd been holding. No one was around. He couldn't even hear voices from inside the building.

For the first time, he wondered what they were doing in there. Waiting until the search had moved on to Grand Ronde or McMinnville or maybe even Portland? If he hadn't seen that oil trail, he would have thought that they had driven Sarah out of the Coastal Mountain Range.

But why stay here? How long would they wait? Wouldn't the police continue searching for them?

Then he remembered how shorthanded the county was. Even if the state police brought personnel to help, they wouldn't be enough to cover every square inch. And even if they were on the ball, they wouldn't be stopping SUVs. They'd be looking for the cars that Sobel had described, hoping to find one with a terrified little girl inside.

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If the men who took Sarah waited, they would be less suspicious. Their getaway would be much easier.

His grip tightened on the knife. So close to disaster. One oil trail away from losing Sarah forever.

He made himself go slow. This much he'd learned from all his novel research: The man who panicked—the man who felt he had to do everything quickly—was the man who died.

Sobel moved to the SUV first. Its wheels were large and state-of-the-art. It would take all the strength he had to damage them. To hedge his bet, he hunkered down beside the wheel farthest from the cabin and opened the air-pressure valve. He threw the cap into the weeds. Then he gripped the knife in his good hand and jammed it into the tire.

It felt good to slam the knife repeatedly into something—a way of working off the adrenaline, the pent-up anger and frustration, the fear buried beneath all the bravado.

When that tire was sufficiently ruined, he did the same thing to the front tire, amazed that no one had come out of the cabin to investigate the chunk-chunk-chunking sounds he was making. Maybe they couldn't hear them. He couldn't hear any conversation from the cabin. They probably couldn't hear much outside.

Bits of galvanized rubber hung off the blade of his knife. He glanced at the other cars. He had to destroy their tires, too, but he wasn't sure doing the wheels would be enough. He had to make certain that no one got away from this cabin. It was the only thing—the best thing—he could do.

He slid under the SUV, wincing as the movement tugged his flannel shirt tighter around his shoulders. The makeshift sling fell sideways, and he banged his arm against the ground. The pain made him whimper—an involuntary sound that he would have taken back if he could. He lay still for a moment, feeling the damn dizziness return.

He made himself exhale, then inhale. Slowly. Measuredly. Trying to control each breath and get rid of the dizziness. After a moment, it passed. He found himself looking up at tubes and wires and pipes—he had no idea what most of them were to or from.

So he cut the tubes and stabbed a hole in the flimsiest of the pipes—the last thing he wanted to do was break off his blade. Fluid dribbled out of one of the tubes. Then he severed a few wires and froze as a thought hit him.

What if one of the wires went to a security system?

His hand stilled near the underbelly of the SUV. Well, if it did, he hadn't hit it yet. And who set the security alarm on a car parked in the middle of nowhere? Paranoid businessmen, maybe, but certainly not crooks.

As if he knew this for a fact. The only crooks he'd ever known

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were the ones he'd read about or the ones he'd conjured in his imagination. These were not imaginary crooks. These were people who had shot his car all to hell, shoved him over an embankment, and then kicked him to see if he was dead.

They were all too real. And all too ruthless.

With his feet, he eased himself out from under the SUV. He disabled the other two cars, always working on the side of the cars that hid him from the cabin itself, careful when he slid underneath not to whack his arm again.

When he finished, he felt as if he had run a marathon. He was dripping with sweat, covered in some kind of noxious goo from one of the tubes, and he ached all over. Still no cops. He wondered if they were having trouble finding him or if he had lost all track of time.

He needed to get back to the road, to tell them where Sarah was, and to have them get her free. He was in no shape for it. He knew that now. But he couldn't quite bring himself to leave. He had to look inside the cabin.

If she was dead—if she even looked dead—he would launch himself inside that building and use his knife to carve up whomever he saw.

The anger propelled him forward.

He stayed to the side of the dirt driveway. It sloped downhill. The back of the cabin was a mess of ruined furniture, rotted firewood, and non-compostable trash—plastic milk containers, beer bottles, and the remains of plastic garbage bags. He avoided the piles, knowing if he knocked anything over, someone would come for him.

Then he eased around the side of the cabin.

Overgrown rhododendrons covered the closest window. Calla lilies the size of children lined this side of the building. There was no way for him to get close without going on the porch.

He wasn't willing to do that.

He crossed behind the cabin again, hoping the other side was less overgrown. It wasn't. This side had hydrangeas and some weird evergreen plant that used to be popular as decoration around houses in the nineteen sixties.

The porch was his only option. The wood was rotted on this side, and the railing had long ago fallen away. He wondered if it would even hold his weight. He crouched down, testing it, and felt the soft, spongy wood move.

It would be a risk. But he had to try.

He eased himself onto the soft wood, careful to keep his head down. The wood groaned. He froze, and the wind—a wind he hadn't noticed until now—swirled around him. He thought it carried voices.

Maybe he was finally close enough to hear. No doors opened, though, and no one came for him.

Slowly, he raised his good hand and touched the window sill. It

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was slimy beneath his fingers. Slimy and ruined. He doubted it would take any pressure at all.

He moved his hand to the side of the building, then braced himself and leaned upward. The rotted porch shifted beneath him, groaning again, and he felt his bad arm ache. If he slipped, he would fall toward his left side and he wouldn't be able to catch himself.

He would be trapped by his own pain, unable to rise, a perfect victim for the men inside.

Still, the compulsion to see if Sarah was alive was greater than any disaster scenario his fertile brain could come up with. He dug his shoes into the building's side and got just enough leverage to raise himself up.

The window was covered on the outside with old dirt and cobwebs. He could just barely peer inside. The men were sitting around a table. Two of them were playing cards. The third was holding Sarah.

She had one tiny arm around his neck, and she was chattering like she always did. Then, as Sobel watched, she flung her head back and laughed.

This was not a terrified child. This was a child completely comfortable with the people around her.

And Sarah hated strangers.

At that moment, his foot slipped. He lost his leverage, his weight landing firmly on the rotted porch. The wood bounced beneath him, and for a minute, he thought it would break off. But with that rubbery movement common to ruined wood, it simply rocked for a minute before easing to a stop.

His heart was pounding so loud, he wondered if the men inside could hear it. His breathing was short and ragged and he didn't want to slip off the porch for fear he'd fall and lose whatever advantage he had.

The best thing he could do now was go back to the road and direct the sheriff up here. Sobel had disabled the cars; no one was going anywhere.

He only wished he could get Sarah free. If he had the ability to turn into Jackson Ross for just five minutes, he would. He would go in, get her out, and be down the hill with her before her captors—if indeed that was the accurate term for them—knew she was gone.

But he couldn't, except in his own imagination, and at this moment, his imagination was a liability.

So he carefully slid off the porch. The wood rocked and groaned behind him, but he tried to ignore it as he moved forward, hugging the side of the building as best he could.

As he went around the mound of garbage, he heard a twig snap.

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He froze. Something moved beside him, and then there was a gun in his face.

Not just one gun, but half a dozen guns. The sheriff and his deputies, their brown uniforms blending with the woods, stood in the driveway, all their weapons pointed at him.

So the cavalry had finally arrived.

Staring down the barrel of a gun held by a macho, grim-faced boy barely old enough to vote was a lot more unnerving than Sobel ever thought it would be.

He took a deep breath and hoped he would be able to sound a lot calmer than he felt. "I'm Max Sobel. I'm the one who called this in."

Still the boy deputy with the big gun didn't move. One of the other deputies did, approaching slowly, his gun up, always keeping Sobel's hands in sight.

The second deputy reached him in a matter of seconds, reached into his pockets, and pulled out both the cell phone and the knife. His gaze met Sobel's. The man's eyes were blue, direct, and emotionless.

Sobel said, "Sarah's inside the cabin. She doesn't look injured. They're holding her. She seems to know them."

The sheriff, an older man Sobel had seen around town, said, "Bring him."

The deputy took Sobel's good arm and pulled him forward. The other deputy kept the gun trained on him. The rest of the group disappeared into the trees.

Sobel half walked, half stumbled with the deputy. They went down the road, past the corner. The sheriff was standing there. He was a beefy man, but most of the beef came from muscle, not flab. He had the square-jawed look of confidence most real cops had. The deputies formed a triangle behind him, like a team ready to charge if anything went wrong.

"I'm not going to yell at you," the sheriff said tightly, "even though you're being an absolute ass. You know how most civilians get killed in police actions? By interfering. By thinking they can be a hero. Looks like you got a hero complex, Sobel."

Sobel felt his cheeks flush. "You would never have found her, never have found this road."

"We haven't done anything, yet. Right now, I'm going to be short one man because he's going to stay here and make sure you don't do anything stupid."

The sheriff started up the road.

"Wait," Sobel said. "I got to see in that cabin. I know where everyone is."

The sheriff stopped. He seemed to be considering Sobel's words.

"Please," Sobel said. "You can yell at me later for everything I did wrong, but use my information. For Sarah's sake."

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The sheriff turned. His dark eyes sparkled with anger. "Make it quick."

Sobel described the interior, the way that they were holding Sarah, the fact that two of them were playing cards. "It looks to me like they're waiting for something, or someone, or a time."

The sheriff grunted, not agreeing or disagreeing.

"And you should probably know that I disabled their cars."

The sheriff's eyebrows rose a little, displaying surprise.

"I destroyed two tires on each and cut up lines underneath. Even if they get out of that cabin, they're not going to get off this road—by car, anyway."

The sheriff studied Sobel for a moment, then nodded. With his right hand, he signaled his men to follow. All of them went except the deputy who had Sobel by the arm.

"Can we at least watch?" Sobel asked. "I want to know if Sarah's going to be all right."

"No," the deputy said. "We're going back to the highway."

Somehow Sobel had known that would be the response, but he had hoped. The deputy led him down the dirt road. Sobel was dizzy again, and did everything he could to remain upright. He didn't want them to know how much this was taking out of him—how much it had taken out of him.

They were almost to the highway when he heard the first gunshot, followed by half a dozen others.

He yanked his good arm free, started back up the road, and the deputy tackled him. Sobel landed on his bad arm—the pain blinding, knocking his breath away, knocking out everything except sensation that was at once cold and white-hot and electrifying.

By the time he could move again, the shooting had stopped.

This was why they had wanted him away from it all. He had been the wild card, the unpredictable factor, the thing they couldn't control.

He and Sarah.

The deputy had rolled off him. "You all right, Mr. Sobel?"

No. Of course he wasn't all right. He was lying on his stomach on a dirt path. Up ahead, there had been gunfire, right near a little girl he loved more than he'd ever realized.

"Sarah," he said.

And to his credit, the deputy did not offer a single platitude. Instead he said, "Let's get you down to the ambulance," as if nothing had gone wrong.

The wait was interminable. Sobel was sitting on the edge of the ambulance's back doors where he had a good view of the highway and that awful dirt road.

He had refused to go inside the ambulance. The paramedics had

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poked and prodded him out here, declaring his arm broken (what a surprise) and his body in a state of shock.

Around him were police cars, not just the state cars but some black county cars, and one marked McMinnville Police. An off-duty officer had heard about this on his police scanner as he drove through the corridor and pulled over to help.

Apparently, Sobel's eyes weren't as good as they used to be, either. He had thought the officers were wearing the same uniform, but they weren't. They had all come together to help him and Sarah.

Sarah. His mind skittered over her name, mixing the sound of it with the sound of gunshots, the way his arm cracked when he fell on it the final time, the silence when the firing ended. Maybe he should have gone for her, advice be damned. Maybe, if he had, she would be all right. It worried him that no one had come out of those trees.

It worried him that he hadn't heard any more shooting, either. And no cars starting—no one trying to drive away on ruined tires. He kept staring at the opening in the trees, hoping—maybe even praying—that he would see Sarah come through it. Sarah, safe and protected, and alive.

When the trees did shudder, he thought he was imagining it. When a deputy stepped out, Sarah in his arms, Sobel thought he was imagining that, too.

Until he realized that Sarah's tiny face was scratched and dirty, that she was crying hard, and that her small hands were braced on the officer's shoulders, trying to push away. Like she always did with strangers.

She was alive and she was safe.

"Sarah!" he called, jumping off the back of the ambulance. He tottered forward, the paramedics yelling at him, and Sarah, sweet Sarah, turned her beautiful face toward his and screamed, "Max!"

She extended her pudgy arms and twisted in the officer's grasp so that he was holding a whirling, determined three-year-old, one who wasn't going to be denied. Sobel reached her as she launched herself toward him. She slammed against his broken arm and he staggered backwards. It took all of his concentration to keep from blacking out again, to keep his good arm wrapped around her.

She smelled of dirt and child-sweat and urine. Her pants were cold and wet, and her shirt—the one he'd put on her that morning, her Pooh shirt, which she loved—was ripped and stained. She buried her face against his neck and sobbed, deep heart-wrenching sobs, the kind he'd never heard her make in the year that he'd been involved with her mother.

He scooted her up, placing his good arm more tightly around her. The movement jostled his bad arm and he had to grit his teeth as he hurried toward the ambulance.

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One of the paramedics, a woman with dirty blond hair and a too-thin face, tried to take Sarah from him, but the little girl tightened her grip on Sobel's neck.

"It's all right," he said. "I'll be right here."

But Sarah didn't seem to care. He wasn't even sure she heard him, the way she cried, her entire body shaking with the intensity of her sobs.

He glanced at the paramedic in supplication. The woman put one slim hand on Sarah's back, as if she could absorb all of that pain through her fingers.

Finally, Sarah took a deep, shuddering breath, and raised her head. "Max," she said, and touched his face with begrimed fingers. There was something in her eyes, something older than he'd ever seen, and it made him want to cry. If he could, he'd use all the powers of his imagination to remove that look from her face. He knew he would be haunted by it for the rest of his life.

"I'm going to hand you to this lady," he said. "She's a doctor. She's going to make sure you're all right. I'll be here the whole time, holding your hand."

Sarah's face scrunched up and he thought she was going to burst into tears again. But her grip on his neck loosened, and he was able to ease her into the paramedic's arms.

"Do you have extra clothes for her?" the woman asked as soon as she touched Sarah's wet pants.

"In the car," he said, "but I'm not going to get them. I said I'd stay here."

The woman nodded. She told one of the other paramedics to get the clothes, then she set Sarah on a bunk. Sobel had to struggle to get into the back of the van to be beside her.

Sarah didn't complain as the woman checked her over. Sobel watched intently, seeing only scratches and the occasional bruise on Sarah's arm. They hadn't had her long enough to do permanent damage—or so he hoped.

As the woman worked, methodically checking Sarah's eyes, her mouth, her scalp, voices echoed in the road behind them. Sobel stiffened, but the paramedic smiled at him.

"They're ours," she said softly.

"They shooted Craig, Max." Sarah's voice was reed-thin.

The paramedic looked up from her work. Sobel felt stunned, but he kept his voice even. "Who's Craig, honey?"

"Mommy's boyfriend. He's not as nice as you."

Max felt cold. It was a physical condition, he told himself. The shock. Nothing more. "I thought I was your mommy's boyfriend."

Sarah gave him a sad look. "No, silly. You're Mommy's finance."

She'd always said fiancé wrong. He'd thought it cute that a little

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girl would even bother to learn the term. Now he was beginning to understand why.

"You never told me about Craig," he said.

"Mommy said not to say nothing. She said you didn't like Craig. She said he made you mad."

Damn right it made him mad. It was making him mad now, though he struggled not to show it.

"Did Craig hurt you?" he asked softly.

Sarah's lips got thin. "He held me too tight. He put his hand over my mouth when the men with guns came. It hurt."

Those were bruises near her nose and mouth. He had thought it was dirt.

"She was kicking him when we got there." The voice came from behind Sobel. "Her face was turning blue. He was cutting off her air."

Sobel turned. The sheriff stood there. He looked smaller than he had in the woods, shoulders slumped, eyes weary.

"We sent one of our men in and got her out."

"It hurt, Max." Sarah's voice hitched.

"Where did it hurt?" the paramedic asked.

But Sarah's gaze hadn't left his. She was making it clear she wasn't going to talk to anyone but him. "Where did it hurt, honey?"

She touched her mouth, her nose, then closed her eyes against it all.

"Is the little girl all right?" the sheriff asked.

"Badly bruised," the paramedic said. "We'll take her in, let her stay overnight. I think Mr. Sobel's hurt worse, but he won't let me help."

They were talking as if he weren't there. He kept his hand in Sarah's. She was trembling ever so slightly.

Then he turned slightly so that he could see the sheriff. Deputies were coming off the road. One was holding his arm. Another sat beneath the hill, put his face in his hands, and shuddered. It looked like he was sobbing.

"We've got a mess in the trees," the sheriff said.

"Do we need to go up there?" the paramedic said.

"Not right away." The sheriff's voice was flat.

"Any of them our guys?"

"No."

Sobel looked at the sheriff. "Sarah was out of there before it happened, I trust."

The sheriff shook his head. "We got her out as fast as we could, but everything came apart rapidly. I don't know what she saw."

Sobel glanced at Sarah. Her eyes were still closed, the lashes moving slightly as if she had fallen asleep and was dreaming. Her breath seemed to be coming evenly. "She knew the man."

"I heard." The sheriff's gaze met his. This time, there seemed to be some respect in it. "You're Maxwell Sobel the writer, right?"

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"Yeah." Sobel suddenly felt wary.

"You rich?"

Sobel paused for a moment. That was a question he usually hated to answer. *It isn't about the money,* he would say. *It's about the writing.*

Only this time it probably was about the money.

"Yeah," he said. "I'm rich."

"They had guns. They didn't shoot you. They took the girl and went up there to wait. She's your girlfriend's daughter?"

For an odd, giddy moment, Sobel wanted to correct him. *My finance's daughter.* "We're engaged. When she got back from New York, I was going to sign the papers to adopt Sarah."

"Was?"

"If you're suggesting what I think you're suggesting, some of my plans are going to change." He was being deliberately vague in case Sarah was still awake. Strange, he wasn't thinking so much about JoAnn. He was thinking about Sarah, about the way he'd finally learned there was more to life than books and words and imagination.

How he'd had to see her before he left that cabin—jeopardize everything, his life, his future—just to make sure she was still alive.

"You got an answering machine, Mr. Sobel?"

"Yeah."

"One that plays back messages no matter where you are?"

Sobel felt cold. "Yeah."

"Let's call it."

Sobel hesitated for a moment. Sarah's hand was lax in his. He put her small fingers across her chest, then reached into his pocket and grabbed his cell phone. He flipped it open, dialed, then pressed the necessary code to get the messages.

Three stored—he'd already heard those the day before: two from his agent on some foreign sales; one from JoAnn declaring her undying love. He was glad he didn't have to listen to that one again.

Then there were four new. The friend who'd babysat for him in Portland saying Sarah had left behind one of her books; two from the police, trying to see if anyone else was there—maybe even trying to see if his 911 calls had been pranks—and one with a filtered electronic voice:

Max Sobel, we have what you lost. If you'd like it returned, it will be expensive. We will call again with instructions.

"Well?" the sheriff asked. This time, Sobel thought he saw compassion in the sheriff's face.

Sobel handed him the phone, explained how to replay the last message, and watched the sheriff as he listened. His expression didn't change at all.

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He flipped the phone closed and handed it back to Sobel. "You think your girlfriend's involved?"

The calls all through her trip, ostensibly lovey, keeping him up to date on her shopping. Usually, when they were apart, they spoke once a day. When he left for Portland, it seemed they were speaking once an hour.

He'd told her when he and Sarah were heading home. He'd spoken to her as the car crossed the Burnside bridge, Sarah giggling at something in the backseat.

He'd told her. And then she'd called them.

Why would she do this when she could have married him? But he knew the answer to that, too. The prenup had been restrictive, and he had told her, early on, that she'd be on an allowance. He'd provide, yes, but there'd be no access.

No control.

A ransom—one she was sure he'd pay—would bring in what she needed.

"Mr. Sobel?"

"She knew where we'd be," he said, amazed such a broken voice could come out of him. "She knew exactly where we'd be."

Two deputies led a man off the side road. His hands were cuffed behind his back, his shirt smeared with blood. His hair hung in a stringy mat over his face, but it was clear he was one of the card players.

Sobel slid off the end of the ambulance, but there must have been something in his eyes because the sheriff gripped him by his good shoulder.

"Let us take care of this," the sheriff said.

"He tried to kill Sarah."

"We have him."

But that wasn't enough for Sobel. He started across the highway. The sheriff held on to him, tight.

"We need him, Sobel. To testify against your girlfriend, and everything she's done to that poor little girl."

Sobel let himself be stopped. Sarah. He hadn't thought about Sarah and what this would mean. "What'll happen to Sarah?"

"You said you got adoption papers," the sheriff said. "Better sign 'em, soon as you go home. And you need to let us know where we can find that girlfriend of yours."

"I'll call her for you," Sobel said. "She's probably waiting to hear from this Craig anyway."

"Well, she won't."

One of the deputies grabbed the prisoner by the head and shoved him into the back of a squad car. The other deputy was still sitting by the side of the road, shaking. The male paramedic was

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tending to the third deputy, Sarah's change of clothes on the road beside him.

"What happened up there?" Sobel asked.

The sheriff shook his head and his eyes grew dark. "Went in, standard two-two formation, going for the girl. Got her—harder than you'd think, Sobel, it was us she was scared of—and the jerk holding her shot my man."

Sobel remembered the first shot, then the others in rapid succession. Sarah. No wonder she looked so old now.

"Brigs, there, he grabbed her and ran, like he was supposed to, shielding her with his back, and we opened up. That one there, he went for the car. Would've got away, too, if it weren't for you."

Sobel could picture it, all of it, the way the bodies moved in Sam-Peckinpaw slow motion, the blood spurting, the holes appearing in that ruined wood wall. Sarah, too frightened to scream, wanting someone familiar, wanting anyone except the uniformed man carrying her down the hill.

Those adoption papers were everything. JoAnn's miscalculation. She hadn't expected to get caught until she had Sarah back, until her companions had collected Sobel's cash, and they were all far away.

Now the trip to New York made sense. Everything, the little looks, the biting comments made since the prenup, all made sense.

"For what it's worth," the sheriff said, "I don't recommend what you did. But we wouldn't have gotten that little girl back without you."

Sobel looked at him, feeling old and tired and not victorious at all. He had never thought about the messes, the way life changed in a heartbeat—gunshots fired at a car, a man falling down an embankment, a woman betraying everything for too much green.

"I have to get back to Sarah," he said.

Jackson Ross wouldn't have said that. Jackson Ross would have been on the next plane, tracking down JoAnn himself. But Jackson Ross was a fictional construct, designed with an outmoded sense of macho by a man who'd only survived one schoolyard fight.

Jackson Ross wasn't real.

Sarah was.

Sobel climbed back into the ambulance and sat beside the stretcher, taking Sarah's hand in his own. She sighed and turned toward him. Her now-clean face bore bruises in the shape of a man's fingers, her skin was scraped from a run in the trees, her mind was forever filled with the terrifying images of good guys with guns.

He had gotten it wrong because real life wasn't entertaining and it didn't play. And people lived with the consequences.

Forever. ●

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Nor Any Thing That Is His

by David Williams

"The Balmores were an agreeable couple, didn't you think?" asked Penelope Nelson-Plum in a languid voice. She was appraising her face in the visor mirror. The face, a more than passingly attractive one, was just as pleasing to its owner as it had been on last examination—which had been only a minute before this, in the hall mirror, when the Nelson-Plums had been taking leave of their dinner hosts in Mulberry Walk.

"Hmm." Penelope's husband, Hubert, was drawing the BMW away from the curb. The downbeat, spare acknowledgement might have been because he was preoccupied, or, and this was more likely, because he was disquieted by the thought that it was Toby Balmore she had found engaging, and not his wife.

Welsh writer David Williams is a frequent contributor to *EQMM*. He describes "Nor Any Thing That Is His" as "a tale that suggests overweaning possessiveness can lead to more rank injustices, not to mention criminal consequences, than were perhaps allowed for even in the Tenth Commandment." He makes the point with characteristic subtlety, and provides a double-twist ending that will delight traditionalists. ¶

The car was a medium-sized model because the affluent Hubert avoided ostentation, but it was new, and he was taking immense care not to scrape it against the vehicles parked in front and behind, as well as the ones across the narrow street. These last included an expensive white Porsche with a distinctive four-character number plate. It was going through Hubert's mind that it might after all have been sensible to have taken taxis. Evening parking in London, especially in overpopulated Chelsea, had become close to impossible. By relying on cabs, he could also have drunk more of the excellent claret during the meal, thus insulating

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himself from the conversational fatuities of most of the other dinner guests. But all this was followed by the contrary proposition that finding a cab late at night could have been a problem, especially since it was raining, and very cold, even for late January.

Hubert had not seriously considered the other alternative of hiring a chauffeured limousine because it would have been far too expensive, though certainly not beyond his means. Now, as he maneuvered the car left into wider Old Church Street, he was content with the certainty that he had saved at least £50 in cab fares. He was nothing if not thrifty. Indeed, meanness, jealousy, and possessiveness were his major shortcomings, although, in fairness, the last of these might be deemed to envelop the two others, thus lowering the count. On the positive side of the human balance sheet, his outstanding strength, and the secret of his professional and private success, was his capacity for making quick decisions—usually the right ones. For instance, he had asked Penelope to marry him on the very night that they had met, ten years before this, and, in his opinion, putting the question when he did had been as timely as it had been sensible. It never occurred to him to ask himself whether Penelope felt the same way about having accepted him, something that exposed a flaw in his armour, as well as the extent of his arrogance.

"Helen Balmore was quite intelligent. Told me she's some kind of interior designer." Hubert was responding at last to his wife's question. "Didn't seem overfond of her husband. He's a bore, and a very stupid one."

"Oh, did you think that? Hmm . . . attractive, though. And quite a wit." Penelope's first observation had been delivered in a carefully objective tone, as though the fellow's animal magnetism was a matter of indifference to Hubert's faithful wife. She flipped back the visor. "You know he's an extremely celebrated architect?"

"I know because he told me so. Several times." Hubert himself was hardly handsome, but he warranted that at least he was better known as a lawyer than Balmore was as an architect.

Penelope smiled. "I could see you were buttering him up over the drinks. I suppose that was on the chance he could push property business your way."

"Certainly that was the only possible reason for wasting time on him," Hubert responded with no equivocation, while indicating that the reason had been ill-founded all the same.

"Well, he was very amusing at dinner. Definitely improved on acquaintance, too. He was sitting on my right."

"Was he? I'd forgotten." Except Hubert had been only too well aware of the fact, and the smarmy, intimate way the fellow had monopolized her during the meal. It wouldn't have surprised him if Balmore had attempted to make passes under the table. Not, he

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was satisfied, that Penelope would have done anything to encourage the fellow.

Hubert Horatio Nelson-Plum was a lawyer who, in his own view, owed nothing to fortune. His background had been a wretchedly humble one. Though he had been given his middle names to favour the English admiral (the hyphen had been added later), there had been not even a tenuous family connection to warrant this. It so happened that at the time of Hubert's birth his mother had been the unwedded barmaid at a pub in the East End of London called the Lord Nelson.

The penniless Hubert had qualified as a solicitor through burning ambition and tireless application. His first professional appointment had been with a small, general legal practice, also in the East End, where, as the most junior member of staff, he had been required to look after the "wide boy" clients who made dodgy and seldom profitable livings, usually via dubious practices liable to land them in trouble. Hubert developed a bent for making such landings softer.

Most of those small-time operators eventually disappeared from Hubert's view, but one of them, Ernie Price, had survived to build a substantial legitimate business in property speculation. Although ostensibly an honest enough occupation, this was where Ernie's early grounding on the fringe of unrespectability had given him the edge on his competitors. And, unlike Hubert, he had never entirely shed his early connections.

It was Ernie Price who had put up most of the money for Hubert to establish his own law firm, but in Holborn, a more appropriate as well as a more desirable section of the City. The lawyer had also developed a deep and tutored understanding of real-estate operations, something that over time had attracted clients with turnovers more impressive even than Ernie's. Even so, the ever-expanding firm of Nelson-Plum and Partners eventually became respected for its expertise in most areas of legal practice, not simply in property law.

So it was that the talented Hubert had become a rich solicitor, though not the richest. This was because the firm's charges were modest compared to the quality of its service—which was another reason why it rarely lost business.

Now aged 49, short in stature (his most credible affinity with the admiral), and prematurely balding, Hubert, a noted member of his social and church community, had recently been elected to his local borough council. As he had expected, this had proved to be a sound professional move. He attended the council's seven o'clock Monday evening meetings, as well as those of its Town Planning Committee, which started an hour before this, with a regularity and keenness that made him an example to all, although it meant

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he never ever got home on Mondays before nine in the evening. He also supported a large number of charities—usually ones that published the names of benefactors.

Until he reached his middle thirties, there had been no romance in Hubert's life—nor had he actually planned to introduce any then, or even later. When he had decided that it was necessary for him to acquire a wife, which was a quite different matter, he had done so with the same practical, unemotional application with which he had tackled everything else deemed to be vital to his progress.

Hubert was a very cold fish.

Blond, slim Penelope was her husband's junior by fifteen years. Her celebrated looks, her stylish upbringing (Cheltenham Ladies College and a middling-class drama degree from Bristol University), her upper-crust manner, and her well-connected stockbroker father, had made her an excellent choice as wife for a thrusting solicitor intent on domestic, professional, and political advancement.

In ordinary circumstances, it is unlikely, even wildly unlikely, that Penelope would ever have considered Hubert a truly excellent choice as a husband. Except that truly exceptional circumstances intervened that had hugely advantaged Hubert's cause.

Penelope had been cruelly crossed in love, and was very much on the rebound at the time Hubert had met her. A young, handsome, but impecunious Guards officer had jilted her for an evidently richer if only debatably more beautiful catch. Penelope, who had been prepared for a life of giddy if relatively impoverished rapture with this dashing Lothario, had been spurred by both shame and fury to accept instead an existence of security and luxury with an older, decidedly less exciting but more materially well-endowed, indulgent partner.

It mattered little to Hubert that Penelope proved, in private, a not overtly passionate wife—and certainly not the sensuous mate that most of his male friends assumed her to be. What mattered was that she was *his* wife, and, soon, the mother of *his* two sons, devoted, in her public persona, to serving *his* well-being. Even intimate friends, who had supposed at the start that it would prove to be merely a marriage of convenience, were weaned from that view by Penelope's clear contentment. This was strengthened, too, after her father's untimely death, when his firm was forced into liquidation. This had been less than a year after the wedding. Thus, if she had married her guardsman, the allowance from her father, which she had secretly expected would have lessened the worst privations of living off army pay, would have been short-lived. It was Hubert who was to make an extra allowance—to her extremely hard-up mother.

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Altogether, Penelope was as happy as her outward demeanour suggested—or very nearly so. Hubert's social demands on her were not that onerous, and his physical ones were practically nonexistent, certainly after she had produced his two sons, thereby stoically "doing her bit," as her mother sometimes termed it.

That Hubert was uncharacteristically generous to his wife was logical enough. She was his most prized and important possession, deserving of nurturing and protection whatever the cost.

"I tentatively invited the Balmores to dine next month. On the fourteenth," said Penelope, again quite casually, as the car headed further west. "The Loxtons had to cry off yesterday, did I tell you? Anyway, we had a hole to fill. Helen Balmore wasn't sure whether they'd be free. But she'll ring me tomorrow. If you're not keen on having them I can put them off. It's just that Toby Balmore knows Freddie Digmont, the man you planned the dinner for."

"How well do you suppose he knows Digmont?" Hubert questioned sharply before committing himself to anything. Freddie Digmont was chief executive of a large development group. The lawyer had long been angling to land the company's legal business.

"Well, he knows Digmont a hell of a sight better than I do, because I've never met him," Penelope replied with amused acidity. "Incidentally, Annabelle's coming as spare woman." Annabelle was Penelope's unmarried niece. "Didn't you say Digmont was gay?"

Hubert frowned. "I didn't say exactly that. Nobody ever knows about him. He's not married," he added guardedly, a careful lawyer retrieving, then keeping, his own counsel. "I gather he has a divorced sister who acts as hostess for him when needed."

"Oh. You didn't tell me to invite her."

"Because that's not part of the arrangement. And don't tell Annabelle he might be gay."

"Of course not. Especially if he isn't. I've been trying to marry her off for years."

The Nelson-Plums did a lot of entertaining at their home in Twickenham—an outer West London suburb where the value of real estate had risen phenomenally since Hubert had bought their substantial Georgian townhouse there. Penelope was a good hostess, allowing that the cooking and serving at her dinner parties were usually handled by professional caterers. Her husband preferred the intimacy of business entertaining at home—apart from its being cheaper than restaurants. Though Hubert doubted Penelope's earlier conjecture that Toby Balmore improved with acquaintance, he was ready to believe that the architect and Freddie Digmont could be close, if only on account of their mutually

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Establishment backgrounds. And if Balmore had been lying to Penelope about his connection with the other man, it would serve him right to be found out.

It was midafternoon on the Tuesday of the following week when Hubert Nelson-Plum discovered that his wife was being unfaithful to him with Toby Balmore.

The lawyer had driven from his office to see a worried client at very short notice. The client's newish headquarters were outside London, close to the South Coast, on a green field site. It had been an unexpectedly crisp, dry day, and Hubert had enjoyed the drive into Sussex. The meeting had finished earlier than expected, and instead of heading north, straight back to town, he had taken a detour to check on the state of the family's summer cottage, which lay twelve miles to the west.

The cottage, in fact a converted farmhouse, except that Hubert preferred the diminishing description, was fairly isolated, but only a short distance from the coast. The Nelson-Plums rarely went there in winter. They used the place mostly in the Easter and summer holidays when the boys, now aged seven and nine, and both at boarding school, were at home. Hubert hadn't mentioned the visit to Penelope because, like the client meeting, it had been wholly unplanned. But nor had Penelope said anything at breakfast about coming here, which is why he was surprised to see her two-seater Mercedes parked at the side of the building as he turned the corner of the winding drive. He distinctly remembered her telling him that she was meeting a woman friend for lunch in Richmond, which was not far from their home. It would be a long lunch, she had emphasized, no doubt to justify the time she would be absent from the house in case he telephoned her.

Hubert's second surprise was the sight of the white Porsche, with the number plate TOB1, drawn up behind the Mercedes. He knew the letters on the plate stood for Thomas Oswald Balmore. They were also the source of Balmore's nickname, Toby. The last time Hubert had seen the car had been in Chelsea six days before, on the night of the dinner party.

A towering fury fleetingly suffused the lawyer as he accepted the obvious—that he had come upon a lovers' sordid tryst. There was no other explicable reason why these two should have travelled separately nearly fifty miles from London to be alone in what they deemed was a "safe house." While he chose to believe that his wife had never been promiscuous before, there was no gainsaying that she was being promiscuous now, or rather that she had been coaxed into it by a base and practised seducer—and a fast-working one, too, Hubert concluded bitterly. The divorce work his

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firm handled made him all too familiar with the kind of circumstances he had come upon here.

The possibility of Penelope actually being unfaithful to him was something that had rarely even visited Hubert's subconscious. It was a credit to his self-control that he didn't storm into the cottage and confront the pair. But storming was not his style: cool, rational consideration, followed by firm action, was. His fury overcome, he was concerned that if the couple learned he knew of their relationship, the ending of it would become needlessly complicated. But one thing clear to Hubert was that the relationship would be ended.

Toby Balmore was despoiling Hubert's most highly prized possession, here on his own property, and, to add further insult to the injury, no doubt on a Nelson-Plum marital double bed. It was the barefaced trespass that was riling him. His wife's body was his exclusive preserve. How dare the vile Balmore violate it. This was not a matter of sentimentality. It was a case of stealing, for which Balmore should be made to pay.

Hubert reversed the car slowly back along the drive, which was sheltered from the cottage by tall evergreens. The main bedroom window was on the far side of the building, and he was confident his presence would not have been revealed.

The lawyer spent the minimum time on the drive back to London debating his course of action. Nothing if not a realist, he accepted the devastating fact that Balmore was having his way with Penelope, and Penelope was letting him. Hubert needed to find the quickest and most permanent way of ending the liaison, without Penelope knowing that he had found her out. Alternatively, if, against his immediate better judgment, he did risk confronting her, and even if she tacitly agreed to stop the affair, it might well prove a promise under duress that she would later fail to keep. There was the possibility, too, that once Hubert confronted her, he could risk losing her to Balmore for good. The last eventuality would have been too degrading, grossly upsetting for his children, and deeply destructive of Hubert's plans for his well-ordered life.

Thus it was that when he was only five miles from the cottage, Hubert solemnly, soberly, and with the minimum of reluctance came to his decision. It was not the end of the affair that he needed to engineer: it was the end of Balmore.

The demise of Penelope's lover had to be contrived in circumstances that would strike Penelope as a retribution she had brought upon herself, leading her to repent of her weakness and thence back to a deeper appreciation of her lawful husband.

Warming to his resolution, Hubert added a touch of piquancy by deciding that Balmore's demise should ideally take place within

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seconds of the man's leaving Penelope's embrace, so that the event would strike her unequivocally as divine intervention. Spiritual convictions were latent in Penelope, frequently manifesting themselves in times of crisis, but veering toward the superstitious rather than the conventionally religious.

As for Hubert, the true justice in his purpose was confirmed when, over dinner that evening, he enquired of Penelope how her lunch in Richmond had gone.

"Oh . . . oh, it was divine," she replied, after a telltale hesitation, and before lifting her gaze from her soup. He had noted a reddening in her cheeks as she continued. "We were both in marvellous form. We were at it for ages longer than we intended, of course." Her eyes opened wide as, with confidence regained, she completed: "It's always the way when we're together, I'm afraid."

Instead of Hubert needing to suppress a surge of protest at this cruel, lewd description of her betrayal, he smiled and looked forward to the meeting he had arranged, by chance a week ago, to see Ernie Price at the other's office in the City at eight the next morning. Both men had always been early risers.

"By the way, I want to get in touch with Pusher Coles. Is he about? His old number's been discontinued," Hubert questioned casually, after he and Ernie had completed their business.

"He's in London, so far as I know. Let's look him up in the . . . the confidential file." The enormous, avuncular property tycoon grinned and knowingly tapped the side of his nose with a stubby finger. He was presiding over, rather than merely sitting behind, an immense antique partners' desk. With the minimum arm movement, he withdrew a small leather-covered notebook from a side pocket and flicked through the leading pages. A moment later he scribbled the telephone number of Pusher Cole's live-in girlfriend on the pad in front of him, tore off the sheet, and passed it to Hubert.

Ernie would not have insulted Hubert, nor risked compromising himself, by asking about his friend's need to reach their mutual, shadiest acquaintance. Pusher's nickname had been earned in his twenties when he had been one of the East End's most successful rent collectors—which was the genteel way of describing the enforcement job he had done, with notable success, for a powerful and unscrupulous landlord. The fact that Pusher had never learned to read—a rent book, or any other kind of document—did nothing to reduce an innate ability to count bank notes, and to recognize their denominations by the number of zeroes depicted. He had worked for Ernie Price, too, but not recently.

It had been Ernie who, four years before, and ostensibly for old-time's sake, had asked Hubert to supervise the man's defence

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after Pusher, still in the enforcement business, had been arrested on a charge of murder. This was after someone he had allegedly assaulted had died of his wounds, and where, unless Pusher kept his mouth shut, Ernie might—just might—have been involved on the fringe of the case.

Only Pusher, Ernie, and the Crown Prosecutor (the latter to his enduring irritation) had appreciated how deftly Hubert had researched, then stage-managed, the defence. The astute Queen's Counsel he had hired had not only got the main charge reduced to manslaughter before the trial started, but had also got the case dismissed on the third day after proving that the principal evidence against Pusher was legally inadmissible.

So Ernie, who had earlier "owed" Pusher, was aware that Pusher knew he "owed" Hubert—and so did Hubert.

Hubert met Pusher the next day on a park bench in the least frequented part of Lincoln's Inn Fields, the historic London square whose modest public gardens, grassed and tree-lined, have, for more than four centuries, offered the only piece of greenery surviving to give credence to its rural name.

The encounter had been in late afternoon with the light already faded. Pusher, surprisingly for a man of his calling, was short, slight, and wiry, with a lined, parched face and a twice-broken nose. Naturally, his conspicuous features were concealed behind a scarf, with his head well hatted against the cold.

Hubert's briefing to Pusher had been short and explicit. Pusher had accepted the assignment with, to Hubert, an astonishing insouciance and alacrity—so much so that Hubert's earlier fantasising that the man beside him might *ever* have been wrongly accused of ill-doing melted in the evening air. There had been no argument about price, either. Pusher had asked for an unreturnable £10,000 there and then, and a similar sum when the job was done—a low, "between-friends" price, he had said, with solid conviction. Hubert had not demurred, since he had come prepared to pay twice that. There had been no question of whys or wherefores, which both men would have accepted might have bedeviled the simplicity and essential anonymity of the arrangement.

When they parted, Hubert felt a grave relief at having transferred a public duty to one far better suited than he was to the discharging of it. He harboured not an iota of moral misgiving about Balmore's disposal. It had only been a few centuries since adultery had been a deadly sin and a heinous crime. In those golden days, no jurist would have disputed that a husband's exclusive right to the pleasuring of his wife's body could be protected by every means at his disposal, and against anyone who sought to usurp it, in the same strenuous manner that he would protect his purse or

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his cattle. The passage of time, in Hubert's view, had done nothing to spoil the justice in any of this.

There should have been eight for dinner at Twickenham on the fourteenth, but, despite Penelope's efforts, there were still only six. Although the Balmores had accepted (as Hubert had been sure they would), another couple had cried off because of flu. It had upset Hubert that on the day before—the second Tuesday since the fateful Chelsea dinner—Penelope had again announced at breakfast that she was lunching with a girlfriend. This time the friend had been named as Lucy, someone well known to Hubert but, equally, someone his wife knew he firmly didn't care for and would not have wanted to make human contact with in any context. The two women, Penelope had embellished, were meeting in Weybridge, which again was only a short drive from the Nelson-Plum home.

Using a pay phone at his London club, Hubert had called Lucy's number at one-thirty, and put the receiver down as soon as she had answered. He had already called Balmore at his office just before noon, on the pretext of offering to provide directions to the house for the following night. The telephonist had said that Mr. Balmore had left for a regular Tuesday site meeting in the country and wasn't expected back that day. Based on this information, Hubert was quite sure that Penelope and her seducer were together again, illegally indulging their lusts in Sussex. Once more, though, he made no move to surprise them, nor to arouse their suspicions, for fear that this might lead to an upset in his plans. After all, the damage to his "property" had already been done. Soon that damage would be under repair.

Annabelle, the unattached niece, an amusing, intelligent, and quite pretty young woman, had made beguiling efforts during dinner to be attachable to the ebullient Freddie Digmont. He had responded to her blandishments with great charm and increasing pleasure. This had surprised Penelope, and led her seriously to doubt her husband's prevarications concerning Digmont's private life. Hubert might have been equally surprised if he had not been preoccupied with another matter not at all to do with Digmont, but in whose honour the meal had originally been arranged.

As for his other two guests, Hubert was convinced that Helen Balmore was behaving with even greater coolness toward her husband than she had displayed on the first occasion he had met her: This was a source of wholesome satisfaction to him. The couple had no children, and it was comforting to know that the man's wife held him in permanent disdain, and thus was unlikely to mourn his passing—and who could blame her in view of his infidelity? That there was some lack of proof, as well as a degree of

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convenient wishful thinking, in all this was not evident to the fixated Hubert. It did, though, reveal that there lingered in his mind a soupçon of decent unease, if not about the fate of his victim, then at least about the effect it was going to have on that victim's sole dependant—until he reminded himself that the lady was not Balmore's dependant in the material sense since she had a thriving business of her own. Earlier it had disappointed him that Balmore and Digmont proved not only to be genuinely close friends, but also to have been so since schooldays—at a school, of course, for the very privileged. They not only talked with similar fruity accents, they even looked alike.

It was nearly eleven o'clock, with everyone seated in the drawing room sipping coffee, and, in Balmore's case, brandy, too, when Digmont announced regretfully, "Now, without disturbing anyone else, including Penelope and Hubert, I'm afraid I have to leave. Catching the first plane to Paris in the morning, which means getting up at five." He gave a martyred grimace before smiling at Annabelle, who was beside him on a sofa. "Getting too old for late nights *and* early mornings," he added, then, after acknowledging her look of coy disbelief, he got to his feet.

"What a shame," said Penelope petulantly.

"I know," the departing guest agreed. "But let's all meet again soon. Very soon." He took Annabelle's hand and kissed it in an exaggeratedly courtly way before taking his leave of the others.

Digmont embraced Penelope, kissing her on both cheeks, while Hubert mused with relish that Balmore would be doing the same shortly, for the very last time, with Pusher waiting across the street to dispatch the swine to his eternal damnation. "I'll see you to your car, Freddie," he said, following Digmont into the hall and closing the drawing room door behind them.

"No, please don't trouble," the other responded as his host helped him on with his black leather driving coat. "It's only just up the road from your gate, and it's bloody cold out. Go back to the others. But do have your secretary ring mine to fix that lunch date. My shout, I insist. At Le Caprice, perhaps?"

"Fine, Freddie."

The other hesitated for a second, then added in a lowered voice, "There's a deal on the horizon I'd very much like your professional view on. Not a word to Toby for the moment. Very hungry architect. Always will be. Dear friend, even so."

"I understand." Hubert wasn't so mesmerized by the pending drama as to fail to appreciate that the original purpose of the dinner had just been handsomely achieved. Assuming that Digmont would have his regular company chauffeur waiting outside, he didn't go with him beyond the heavy front door which let onto a narrow, low-walled courtyard with an iron gateway to the street.

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And it *was* very cold, with ice settling on a light fall of snow earlier.

When Hubert rejoined the others, his wife was affecting a conspiratorial look, while holding a large envelope on her lap which she had just removed from a bureau drawer. "Darling," she said, "Helen and I have made a big decision."

"Which I warmly endorse," offered Balmore, vigorously circulating the brandy in his glass.

"Me too," added Annabelle.

Hubert gazed round at all the others. "I'm no good at guessing games," he offered, in a tone that hinted more of severity than good humour.

"I know you're not. Nor surprises, either," Penelope said, carefully pulling a sheaf of coloured drawings from the envelope. "Which is why Helen and I are going to come clean about a little secret we've been keeping from you for two weeks."

Hubert gave a tight smile, wondering how the disclosure would equate with the thundering great secret that she and Helen's husband thought they had been keeping from him over the same period.

"The thing is, Hubert," Helen Balmore put in, "Penelope's hired me to do over your study at the Sussex cottage."

"And her plans are just gorgeous, darling," Penelope interrupted. "It's to be my birthday pressie to you."

"Only she's got cold feet," Helen took up the tale again. "I don't blame her, either. I mean, you may hate my designs."

"No, that's not possible," Penelope insisted.

"It's perfectly possible," Helen countered modestly. "These things are a matter of individual taste, after all, and while we were all set to start the job next week—"

"Fact is, old chap, it's your private snug, and I for one have said you ought to be allowed to give a yea or nay on the plans before the girls splurge out on the big money part, after which you'll be stuck with the thing," Balmore brusquely completed his wife's halting explanation.

"And no one's going to be hurt if you say it's all got to go back to the drawing board. Honestly," Helen added.

"I'm sure anything you've devised will be . . . will be splendid," Hubert responded thinly. "Really, I have very little aesthetic sense." He swallowed hard before adding, "So you've been down to see the cottage?"

Both Penelope and Helen greeted this with peals of laughter. "To see it? Helen's practically been living there," said Penelope.

It was as though a large lead weight had found its way into the pit of Hubert's stomach.

"That's a slight exaggeration," Helen corrected. "I've been there

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three or four times. I have another commission in Brighton at the moment, a big one, so it's been easy to pop up from there. Penelope and I have been meeting at the cottage midday on Tuesdays."

"For sandwiches," Penelope put in. "I've had to pretend I was lunching with other girlfriends," she added, laying the coloured drawings and some swatches of material along the back of a long sofa. "Anyway, now the cat's out of the bag, darling, come and look at the plans."

Hubert did as he was told, gazing with apparent intensity without taking in anything, his mind seized by awesome misgiving. "Oh, I approve, without hesitation," he found himself saying, a minute or so later, after Helen had whisked him through the plans. It was quite a small project in any case.

"Knew you would," cried Annabelle, slapping her hands together. "I had a sneak preview before you got home this evening, Hubert."

"So our hideaway's been busy for the time of year," Hubert began, suppressing his confusion. "Have you been down there, too, Toby?" he enquired, in as casual a manner as he could muster, while making urgent plans to reach the street before the others left.

"No, much as I'd like to have done." The other man finished his brandy before continuing. "Too busy, I'm afraid. My only escape from town for the last two weeks has been an office block we've designed that's going up near Bath. I've been spending my Tuesdays there with the anxious client." He grinned. "We go together in the back of his socking great Rolls-Royce. Very comfy it is, too."

"That's why I've been allowed to borrow Toby's Porsche on Tuesdays," said Helen. "Gives me more status than my little Honda. Especially up against Penelope's sexy Merc."

"Indeed," Hubert commented, feeling the cold sweat on his forehead. "But you've both come in the Porsche tonight?"

"As it happens, no, old chap," answered Balmore. "Since you've such a reputation as a generous host, amply justified, I may say, by all the marvellous fodder and booze we've all enjoyed tonight, I decided to indulge my newfound taste for large, chauffeur-driven conveyances by hiring one for the evening. Only a Daimler, I'm afraid, but quite luxy." He glanced at his watch. "Our man should be waiting outside now." He gave a chuckle. "Actually, I thought we'd upstage old Freddie. Did he drive himself here in his own Porsche?" he questioned.

Hubert caught his breath. "Yes. I . . . I think I may have caught sight of it." So the white Porsche he thought had been Balmore's had to have been Digmont's—and would Pusher have made the same mistake? No, the number plates would be different—provided Pusher could read them.

"Got cherished licence plates similar to mine, very similar as a

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matter of fact," Balmore supplied, inadvertently on cue. "He's just bought FOD1, which he's been after for ages. His middle initial begins with an O, too, except in his case it stands for Oliver. He had to pay a fortune for that number, from one of those car number brokers. I got mine privately for a song years ago. Been transferring it from car to car ever since."

Before the speaker had finished, they had all heard the long, urgent ring on the doorbell.

"Excuse me, I must answer that." Hubert, breathing heavily, was already hurrying out.

"Don't worry, old chap, that'll be our driver. I told him eleven-fifteen, and he's right on time. Oh . . . oh well." Balmore's last words indicated surprise that his host had now disappeared into the hall.

When Hubert threw open the front door there was, indeed, an elderly man in a suit and chauffeur's hat standing on the step, but slightly ahead of him was a beefy young uniformed police constable.

It was the policeman who spoke. "Evening, sir. I'm afraid there's been an incident in the street. It started just a bit along from your gate."

"Someone's been hurt?"

"Yes, sir. A gentleman who came from here—"

"It . . . it can't have been." Hubert interrupted with more pleading than logic in his words. He was shivering now, but not from the icy cold.

"I'm sorry, sir?" The policeman didn't understand.

"I mean, only one person has left the house. Mr. Freddie Digmont. That was five minutes ago. I saw him out."

"That's right, sir." It was the chauffeur who was speaking now. "I saw the gentleman as I turned into the street. As he approached his car, a white Porsche, it is, another man stepped across from the other side, stopped a yard behind him, and, cool as a cucumber, pointed a gun at his head."

"Oh no. Oh my God. He's dead?" Hubert half whispered while holding on to the door, certain that Digmont had taken the bullet meant for Balmore.

The chauffeur, who had missed the question, went on. "I drove at them, sir, sounding my horn. A shot was fired, but your Mr. Digmont, hearing the horn, he'd swung round, then ducked. The shot missed. The gunman tried to fire again, but his gun must have jammed. By that time Mr. Digmont had tackled him, rugby style. They struggled for a moment before the chap broke loose and started off up the street with Mr. Digmont running after him, both of them going hell for leather. I was calling the police by then on my mobile. Then I drove after them. Mr. Digmont had nearly

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caught the gunman by the church on the corner, but as he was tackling him again, Mr. Digmont slipped on the ice. I think he's bust an ankle."

"He's alive? He's alive?" Hubert repeated plaintively. He had stepped forward and was grasping the speaker's arms with both hands.

"That's right, sir," put in the policeman. "He's sitting outside with my partner, in this gentleman's Daimler. The man's got away, I'm afraid. For the moment, anyway." But the last words didn't suggest that there were very high hopes of his being caught. "Mr. Digmont wanted to let you know he's safe," the constable continued. "That's before we get him to the hospital. Are you okay, sir?"

"Yes . . . yes, thank you." Hubert's shattered composure was reasserting itself. "I'll just have a word with Freddie Digmont before he leaves." He moved across the courtyard to the gate.

He'd been a fool to doubt Penelope, and rash, yes, rash to have commissioned Pusher to shoot the innocent Balmore. He could *only be thankful, no credit to himself, that no irretrievable harm* had been done. They'd never trace Pusher—any more than he, Hubert, would ever retrieve his £10,000, the price of his stupidity.

The crestfallen lawyer continued toward the Daimler, satisfied that his most precious possession remained unsullied. His remorse over the way he had wronged Penelope was deepening in his mind, and actually prompting him to think himself totally unworthy of her.

In the hallway, oblivious yet to what had happened outside, Helen Balmore had just taken leave of Penelope in the hallway, and was moving toward the front door, ahead of her husband. It was his turn to place a chaste kiss on Penelope's cheek. As he did so, she whispered breathily in his ear: "Here on Monday at six, as usual, my darling." ●

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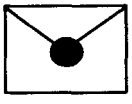

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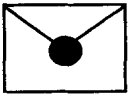

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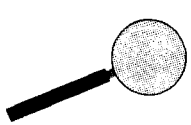

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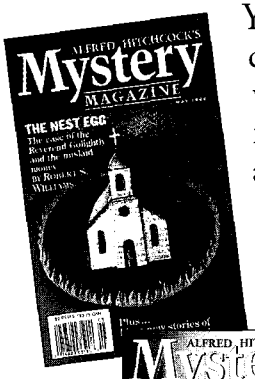

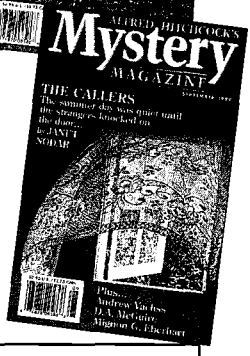

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